

Sermon 3-12-23
Paul Purdue preaching

It was raining and cold that December Friday night, when I answered a call from one of my son's friends. Blake wondered if the high school marching band might shelter in the church as they waited for the Christmas Parade to begin. Without much thought, I told Blake I would head that way to unlock the gym for them. Clearing his throat Blake said, "Ummh, Pastor Paul, the chorus is setting up for Breakfast with Santa in the gym, could we use the sanctuary?" I paused because Tullahoma had a rule restricting use of the historic sanctuary and I imagined 120 pairs of wet band shoes tracking through the Sunday ready sanctuary. However, the Oxford Dictionary defines "sanctuary" as "a place of refuge or safety."

Pulling into the church parking lot, a gaggle of high schoolers tucking, trumpets and oboes under plastic ponchos, crowded the doors. Something did not seem right. It seems the Moore County band heard of a refuge from the rain from the Tullahoma teens. Soon 120 Tullahoma teens dashed in followed by the Manchester band and then Winchester. Four hundred wet uniforms, 800 grassy dress shoes, color guard flags along the back wall, wet trumpets on the pews, and a line of bass drums nestled between the back two rows. I have rarely seen so many grateful teenagers rejoicing to just be in church.

I sat down on the altar steps directing traffic and chatting with our First Methodist young people and band parents, when I noticed a Moore County woodwind and two color guard members eyeing the pipe organ as if it was the holy grail. I introduced myself and asked if they played; a young person named Billy said no but added that he did play the piano. Despite my lack of answers, Billy peppered me with questions about the organ. I asked the Lynchburg trio if they wanted to see the pipe room. We made our way upstairs, I unlocked the pipe room, and gave a quick tour. You would have thought Billy had seen inside King Tut's pyramid.

At 8am on Sunday morning, Billy and his mother sat on the front row of the early service. I introduced Billy to our organist Michelle. Every week thereafter, Billy would be there before he darted off to his home church, sometimes with his mother. One day, Michelle announced that Billy would be playing the offertory. He had been taking lessons from her. Billy began to play about once a month and even filled in when Michelle was away. Then one Sunday Billy was just gone. Michelle told me that Billy had taken a job at a Lutheran church down the road!

Matthew gives us two stories about Jesus breaking the rules. What if I cared more about the rules or muddy shoes than a hundred wet teenagers? These two stories offer us an important lens by which to interpret scripture- when do we "loosen or tighten up" the rules. (Matthew 16)

Jesus was passing through the wheat fields on the Sabbath. The hungry disciples picked the heads off the wheat and ate them. Some Pharisees said to Jesus, "Look,

your disciples are breaking the Sabbath law.” The fifth commandment states, “Keep the Sabbath day and treat it as holy, exactly as the Lord your God commanded. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. Don’t do any work on it.” (Deuteronomy 5)

When we badmouth the Pharisees, Sadducees, or legal experts, we usually miss the lesson we should be learning. The Pharisees would make good Methodists; they began their days with prayer and tried to do right all day. They signed up for meal trains, sang in the choir, taught Sunday School, visited the sick, volunteered at Community Care Fellowship, boarded the neighbors dog and tithed their income. Scholars tell us the Pharisees most likely liked Jesus. They probably expected that Jesus would correct the disciples when they pointed out, “Jesus, look, your disciples are breaking the Sabbath law!”

Jesus does not correct the disciples; in fact, Jesus stands with those breaking the church rules. How do we know when to loosen Scripture, how do we interpret scriptures? Jesus could have argued that the disciples' grain-picking was not technically work, more like using a fork, and thus in keeping with the Sabbath laws. Jesus' critique goes much deeper than that, biting into the rule itself and not just how the technicalities of how one applies it. Jesus offers a different theological standard, “God desires mercy not sacrifice,” and uses three stories to show why mercy matters more than the rules. Now sacrifice was not unimportant: Leviticus offers 11 chapters about worship and sacrifices. However, God cares about mercy more than sacrifice- more than rules.

Jesus' way of interpreting scripture here is not to battle back and forth with various verses as he did with the devil, but to offer stories that call upon our compassion. It is theology by experience. Haven't you read what David and his troops did when they were hungry? “How they went into God's house and broke the law by eating the bread of the presence, which only the priests were allowed to eat?” Now if you read that story in 1 Samuel 21, you will realize that David is less than honest with the priest about his mission, and yet Jesus says hunger supersedes the law. Hunger matters more than the law. Jesus uses a very gray standard, a hermeneutic of compassion- a dotted line theology rooted in human need and divine mercy.

Jesus cites Hosea 6, which is not a verse about Sabbath laws, but about God's character. Jesus tells us to interrupt the law with mercy, “If you had known what this means”, (which is kind of a burn) “I want mercy and not sacrifice, you wouldn't have condemned the innocent.” Jesus does not play it down the middle, saying some people read it this way and others that way. Jesus points out to those standing firmly on the law, “You condemned the innocent!”

“God desires mercy not rules” might make a good T-shirt. Rigidity about rules and inflexibility in theology may be warning signs of idolatry. If you are too worried about muddy feet or who has unclean hands, you might not really understand what a sanctuary is- you have forgotten it is a hospital and a refuge, where divine love meets human need. At the end of the story, the angry church folks will seek to destroy Jesus

because Jesus does not tow their theological line. Anger at times is justified. Jesus grew angry at hard hearts in Mark 3. But anger is also a warning light to us all on the left, the middle, and the right. James 1 tells us that anger rarely achieves righteousness, and 1 John 4 tells us that if you say you love God and hate others, you are a liar.

Perhaps the most pervasive kind of idolatry in the church today is Bibl(e)-idolatry or worship of the Bible instead of worshiping our God, who we encounter in the Bible. The worship of the Bible really puts us in control; we have the rules and do not need the Spirit or spiritual discernment, it is black and white: don't tell us some story about a cow hung up in the barbed wire or how hungry you might be. We become judges, religious lawyers, sidestepping or applying the rules as we see fit. In Matthew 23, Jesus tells us that faith, peace, and justice are the standards to measure the law. Like mercy, those are gray standards. We must always be asking, even of scripture, who is God and what does mercy, compassion, peace, love, and justice demand of us?

In Matthew's second story, Jesus goes to church and meets a person with a withered hand. We should note that a withered hand meant you were considered as religiously less valued, you were not allowed to be a priest or even get too close to the altar. (Leviticus 21) Hoping to entrap Jesus, his church critics ask, "Does the law allow a person to heal on the Sabbath?" Again, Jesus answers with a story from everyday life, not some Bible verse. Jesus invites us to think about the law and about what the Sabbath really means. What is the deeper moral law (mercy, compassion, peace, justice, love)? Why do we sabbath? What is the sabbath all about? It's coming together, passing the peace, lifting up praise, studying the scriptures, hearing forgiveness, being renewed, celebrating creation, and things like that.... doing good!

"Who among you has a cow caught in the barbed wire and will not grab the snips and free it? How much more valuable is a person than livestock! So the law allows a person to do what is good on the Sabbath." Do good! Mercy not sacrifice. Goodness matters more, mercy matters more, healing matters more, compassion matters more. Think of the big ideas behind the commandments: (1) we honor God, (2) we avoid idolatry, (3) we keep religious language special, (4) we honor the sabbath, (5) honor elders, (6) honor life, (7) honor created things, (8) honor marriage, (9) honor our word, and (10) honor our neighbors' things. The heart of all ten commandments are things like honor, peace, faith, mercy, compassion, justice, and love. Mercy matters more than the black and white rules. How do you interpret the Bible? Well, it's not so cut and dried; sometimes you need to break the rules to uphold mercy! Sometimes, you need to pick the grains off the head or heal on a Sunday, lie to the Gestapo, and embrace those marginalized. And always be careful not to condemn the innocent.

The law is not a burden or meant to harm us, but for our good. It reminds us what matters to check our words and guide our steps. Take time to be holy, love freely, provide refuge, welcome strangers, love neighbors, defend those on the margins, don't condemn the innocent or judge others.

Well, on Saturday morning, a crew from the Tullahoma band showed up to clean the church; they even mopped the bathrooms. The Lutherans got a good organist. And the church revised its rules to exempt school bands, chorus, theater, and arts programs from some of our fees, restrictions, and rules. The church valued loving neighbors, fostering the arts, and supporting public education. And the church remembered that the Christmas parade always began in front of the church and they decided to give away hot chocolate, open up our restrooms, and welcome people to spend a few minutes in our historic sanctuary. So often first time visitors saw the magnolia leaves and circling our massive nativity on the altar said things like, "Wow. I have lived here all my life and never knew how beautiful this church was." And often they came to visit or at least thought a little better of us. The church is called to do good. May mercy be our guide. Amen.