

April 29 It is Lawful to do Good!

Matthew 12:9-14

This particular healing story is one of the more unique ones in the life of Jesus. The man is never named, we are told he has a withered hand and has come to worship on the Sabbath. Jesus was also at the synagogue that day. He is asked, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? There is a lot more to that question, as we will soon figure out. Jesus' answer is about a greater theological issue when he says to those present "It is lawful to do good!" Then he said to the man, stretch out your hand and it was restored. Again, this causes the Pharisees to conspire against him. The man, who is the object of healing, never asks for it, doesn't seek Jesus out or proclaim faith. He becomes an object lesson, nothing more. Yet, his life was forever changed.

So what was the big issue? The Sabbath was central in Jewish life, its proper observance was important. In the Ten Commandments, it says "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it Holy." And a little later, "you shall not do any work on the Sabbath." What do those commands really mean?

In view of the ambiguity of the scripture itself as to how to keep the Sabbath holy and what constituted work, a body of tradition, having the force of religious law, had developed to guide the proper celebration of the Sabbath. In these traditions, caring for people was paramount. To set aside strict observance of the Sabbath for human need was, in Judaism, seen as a way of honoring God.

In theory all agreed with this concept. Its exact application was what was disputed. Some rabbis taught that an animal that fell into a pit on the Sabbath could be helped out because animals were a part of God's creation and should not suffer. Others specifically rejected this because care of an animal should not cause one to set aside God's law. The same kind of debate occurred when it comes to healing. Some rabbis said that healing is an act of compassion and it is always appropriate, even on the Sabbath. Others said healing could be done on the Sabbath only if it was necessary for life. This led to further debates about what was necessary for life! In light of such considerations, the question posed to Jesus about whether it is lawful to heal on the

Sabbath has much greater importance. They are asking Jesus to enter into the debate as to the proper observance of the Sabbath, something not settled even to this day in Judaism and in Christianity. His statement “It is lawful to do good” is not, as Christians often view it, a rejection of “Jewish legalism” but a proclamation that doing good is one of the ways we honor God. Jesus’ answer and deed says he is an advocate of a more liberal interpretation of how to honor the Sabbath. The Pharisees see this as a dangerous slide into a rejection of all they hold sacred and so they wish to eliminate him.

We might think this is just a discussion from the past about arcane laws. Yet, historically, this debate about what was appropriate on not the Sabbath, but on Sunday, led to city governments passing all sorts of Sunday Blue Laws. These were laws that legislated what is acceptable behavior on Sundays. You remember those laws such as: no liquor being sold on Sunday, what businesses could or should be open, to even, in some places, deciding that a Sunday paper could not be printed. Some of these so called blue laws remained on the books until recently. The town of Lynden, WA was settled by Dutch Reformed farmers. It has always had a conservative point of view. Until about 10 years ago no grocery store was open on Sunday. If you needed milk, you drove to Bellingham or Birch Bay. While we were serving the church in Bellingham a supermarket chain came to Lynden and bucked the unofficial rules of no business open on Sunday. They were picketed and boycotted. Yet, people came to shop and within a few years all the stores were open.

The people challenging Jesus that day were focused on rules, Jesus wanted them to see the bigger picture. This is why he said, “It is always appropriate to do good.” Goodness trumps rules. For Jesus goodness is actually honoring the Sabbath because God is a God of goodness. Jesus understood the need for rules. He did not reject all of the Sabbath rules as unnecessary. He was against a legalism that did not take into account the people the rules affected and their needs. It is a story where compassion sometimes is the most important thing we can do.

So this story asks us: “Is it lawful to do good, at all times and in all places and in all circumstances?” The quick answer is yes. Yet life is a lot murkier than that. We, like

the people in Jesus day, are striving to follow Jesus' words but are not always sure what our response to events and people should be. Let me give you a couple of examples. Which is the greater good: to welcome the immigrant or to have safe borders? Each has their merits. Harsh application of immigration rules can destroy families and force so called dreamers to return to a homeland they have never really lived in. Ignoring the rules of immigration can lead to chaos. What do we do? Or, here is one I constantly deal with. Is it good to let the kids use our sidewalk as a skate park extension, with huge liability issues, because we want to be seen as welcoming or is it a better good to say no because they have a safer place to use their skateboards? Again, both have their merit and sometimes we let them ride and sometimes we tell them to go. Neither feels exactly right. How do we figure out the good that God wants? That is the heart of this story. Here are some of the criteria I use.

The first of these might surprise you. It is that rules are helpful. Sometimes when we begin to get into these discussions some want to proclaim that everything is relative and that any rules make us harsh and unbending. Yet I see the value in them. It is good to wrestle with issues and come up with a group consensus. That was how much of the laws surrounding the Sabbath came into existence. Creating rules allows us to figure out how to handle 90% of the stuff of life. But before you totally embrace the love of rules we need to hear the next part.

The second thing we need to recall is that rules are not absolute. This is where we get into problems, just as in Jesus day. Once you create rules then anyone who does not follow the rules is, "a rule breaker!" Obviously, this means they are in the wrong. Jesus, that day in the synagogue, was proclaiming that sometimes compassion should cause us to break rules. Just because there is a rule that can handle most situations does not mean one rule fits all of life. We are always required to step back from the rule and look at the individual and the situation. We need to see their needs, their struggles and such. No one would suggest, even then, that the man with the withered hand was not better off after being healed. It was truly a sign of grace. The only problem was the rule. To celebrate his healing is to support a rule breaker, something they were unwilling to do. So even though I celebrate the positive aspects of

rules we all also need to be rule breakers. We need to look at rules and see where they get in the way of true ministry.

I believe, as Jesus seemed to indicate, that compassion for one is often more important than the comfort of many. The leaders asked Jesus if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. They were not concerned about any one individual. They were afraid that if too many exceptions to the rules were allowed soon no one would be honoring God or the Sabbath. Jesus looked at the person and his need made the discussion about whether or not it was right to heal on the Sabbath irrelevant. His understanding of God is that God is a God of love, forgiveness and compassion. Doing good honors this God and so it honors the Sabbath. This is why he said, "It is right to do good." This is always a place of controversy. What one sees as compassion another sees as total disregard for what is important.

Remember my story about the stores in Lynden. When the supermarket planned to open on Sunday one of the reasons they used is that a mom on fixed income should not have to drive 20 miles round trip for diapers. They were using compassion to change a norm. The religious leaders proclaimed that the mother should have planned ahead and bought the diapers on Saturday. They feared that if one store was open soon all the stores would be open. It happened. But as one wag said, "Shopping habits didn't change, just driving habits!"

Whenever we run into a situation and only rules are presented, we need to pause. We need to ask, "What about the individual?" We need to think about how to honor God in this situation. Occasionally rules will be broken and lives will be renewed. The man who went to the synagogue that day was not expecting to be placed in the middle of a heated theological battle. He probably was uncomfortable about the whole thing. No one even cared what he thought about the issue. But in the end he found healing and new life. Jesus cared about him and knew doing good for him was honoring God and keeping the day holy.