

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 3, 2018
Second Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 5:1-21
Psalm 81
2 Corinthians 4:1-12
Mark 2:23-3:6

Our Gospel lesson today portrays the fifth in a series of stories that Mark uses to show the rising hostility toward Jesus by the Pharisees and religious leaders. The underlying issue involves the understanding of the Law given to Moses, which our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy summarizes for us. (Deuteronomy means “second law.”)

And it is one particular portion of the Law that brings things to the breaking point here in our text, namely, the *Sabbath*. The Law commanded the children of Israel to rest on the Sabbath as a way to remember their deliverance from Egypt, to renew their minds and bodies, and to worship the LORD. The formula was six days of work, and one day of rest.

So, here in our Gospel lesson Jesus and his disciples are walking one day on the Sabbath through a wheat field, and his disciples begin breaking off heads of grain to eat. Some Pharisees, who are following along, get their tunics all twisted in a knot when they see this. Their way of approaching the Law is through strict, rigid observance. When they see what Jesus’ disciples are doing, they interpret it

as “harvesting” grain, and therefore work, which is a violation of the fourth commandment.

Jesus’ response here is what makes this episode fascinating and intriguing, so we must “unpack” it a bit.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees by referencing a story from the Old Testament. It occurred at a time when David was on the run from King Saul, who was trying to kill him because he had been anointed king and Saul was in a jealous rage.

One Sabbath day David and his warriors were hungry and David went to Abiathar the High Priest and asked him for bread. (Note: Many scholars feel they have caught Mark making a huge mistake here, because Abiathar was not yet the High Priest. It was his father, Ahimelech. They use this as evidence that the Gospels, and therefore the Bible, are unreliable. More about this later.)

The only bread that was available was the holy bread, known as the “Bread of the Presence” that was in the sanctuary of the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:30). It was made of fine flour, baked in twelve loaves, and arranged in two stacks of six loaves each on a table of gold that stood in front of the Holy of Holies. The bread was covered with frankincense, and was to be a memorial food offering to the LORD.

The Bread of the Presence (literally, the “Bread of the Face”) could only be eaten by Priests. The priests ate the bread each Sabbath day and replaced the loaves with freshly baked loaves. Tradition indicates that the bread always remained fresh for the entire week, signifying the fact that the Word of God never becomes stale or outdated, but is the source of life itself and sustains all things.

When David asked Ahimelech for bread on that Sabbath, there was no common bread available. The only bread available was the holy bread, the Bread of the Presence. David asked Ahimelech for it, and Ahimelech gave it to him and his soldiers to eat.

Jesus, in bringing this story up to the Pharisees, is clearly linking himself to David. And this is where we must probe what Mark is doing when he has Jesus refer to Abiathar, not his father Ahimelech, as the High Priest when David and his men ate the holy bread. It involves a rather convoluted trip back in time, but it’s worth it.

The wicked Herod Antipas, who would later have John the Baptist executed, was ruling Galilee during Jesus’ life. Herod Antipas is like Saul, the king who pursued David to kill *him*.

John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus as the royal Davidic Christ, stands in parallel to Samuel, who anointed David to be king and confronted Saul.

Abiathar (who Mark has Jesus mention here) was descended from the High Priest Eli, under whom Samuel received his call. Abiathar was the final priest in the ancient line, removed ultimately by Solomon because of the wickedness of Eli's sons. So, we read in I Kings 2:27: *“So Solomon expelled Abiathar from being priest to the Lord, thus fulfilling the word of the LORD that he had spoken concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh.”*

The removal of Eli's descendants from the priestly line was prophesied about in I Samuel 2:

And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according To what is in my heart and in my mind; and I will build him a sure House, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever. (I Sam. 2:35)

The reference to Abiathar, then, is Jesus' way of showing that *he is the fulfillment of this prophecy*. Jesus is comparing the priesthood of his day to the situation during the time of Abiathar.

When Mark has Jesus citing Abiathar as the High Priest and not his father, Ahimelech, Mark knows exactly what he is doing. Mark wants to show that Jesus is the “new” David. Just as the LORD raised David up as king, even now he is raising up Jesus as the ultimate messianic Son of David, as the everlasting king who fulfills the promises regarding David's everlasting dynasty (2 Sam. 7:4-16).

And Jesus does all of this not just as the messianic king, but also as the faithful priest whose dynastic house, the Church, is built by the LORD. (I Sam. 2:35)

And as the faithful Priest, Jesus will also provide the “new” Bread of the Presence to the people (i.e., the Eucharist).

Now, the reason that Jesus mentions this story about David and the Bread of the Presence, and the reason I have taken you down this winding historical road, is all summed up in verse 27, where Jesus says: *The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath.*

Jesus is declaring his total authority over the Law given to Moses, and specifically to the fourth commandment. But he does so here with the Pharisees not as just another scribe or teacher or debater of religious minutiae. He does so as the “new” David, the Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath.

And what the Lord of the Sabbath says is that the Law was meant to meet the needs of people, *not the other way around*. For the Pharisees, humankind is meant to serve the needs of the Law. For Jesus, the new David, the Law exists to serve humankind.

Now, today’s sermon could have actually been quite brief. We could simply affirm that the Sabbath exists to meet the needs of people, not the other way around, and be done with it. Pray the benediction and go home. But hopefully doing it this way was a little more fun!

As we come to the Lord’s Table, one quick thought. Jesus’ words today give us opportunity to reflect about how we spend our Sabbath days. Are we

spending our Sabbaths in the manner God intends for us? Is the Sabbath a day of rest and worship, a day that is different from the other days of work and frenetic activity? If not, what might the Spirit want to say to us this morning?

As we come to the Table, the Bread of the Presence, the holy bread, is still offered to us. But it is offered to us by the faithful, and great High Priest, the new and final Davidic King. As the offering of the holy bread was renewed weekly in the worship of the Tabernacle and later the Temple, so today the Eucharist is the perpetual offering of the Living Bread, Jesus himself, in the worship of his Church.

So come with faith, and gratitude, that all of God's Law is meant to free us and liberate us, not enslave us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.