

## “Faith Renewed”

Mark 2:23–3:6

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### Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Back in 1984, J. Ruth Gendler wrote *The Book of Qualities*; in it, she personifies feelings and behaviors by assigning them gender, a particular living situation, relationships, hobbies, and work among other things. Gendler gives them the kinds of encounters and experiences that we can relate to, or aspire to and that adds understanding of the qualities themselves. For example, there are healthy aspects to fear; human beings have this gift of feeling fear because it can literally save our lives; but Fear would be just as happy to keep us home all together so we should know that, as Gendler says, “Fear has a large shadow but he himself is quite small” (4).

It’s like putting a laser beam of insight on actions and feelings, like inspiration for example, we might call it the Holy Spirit. Gendler says, “Inspiration is disturbing. She does not believe in guarantees or insurance or strict schedules. She is not interested in how well you write your grant proposal or what you do for a living or why you are too busy to see her. She will be there when you need her but you have to take that on trust. Surrender. She knows when you need her better than you do” (90).

And in the author’s world, “Faith lives in the same apartment building as Doubt. When Faith was out of town visiting her uncle in the hospital Doubt fed the cat and watered the asparagus fern. Faith is comfortable with Doubt because she grew up with him. Their mothers are cousins. Faith is not dogmatic about her beliefs. Her friends fear that Faith is a bit stupid. They whisper that she is naïve and she depends on Doubt to protect her from the meanness of life. In fact, it is the other way around. It is Faith who protects Doubt from Cynicism” (22). She gets to something deeper in our language and in our psyches as she connects emotions and behaviors to give us tools to think about the quality of life we are creating not only for ourselves but for all those around us – which is the crux of the matter in Jesus’ eyes – to nurture the qualities that create healthy and strong communion.

So it was Gendler who came to mind the week after Trinity Sunday. Here we are, just two weeks out of Eastertide and in only the second chapter of Mark and there is already dramatic controversy, intrigue, and plotting against Jesus. We are already being pulled back toward the trial and the cross (the feeling is right here again). In calling the disciples, Jesus said the kingdom of heaven was near; in healing Peter’s mother-in-law, he started to build a following, and worry has begun to form with the religious establishment.

“Worry” says Gendler, “has written the definitive work on nervous habits. She etches lines on people’s foreheads when they are not paying attention. The drug companies want Worry to test their new tranquilizers but they don’t understand what she knows too well. There is no drug that can ease her pain. She is terrified of the unknown” (3). We could substitute ‘Pharisees’ for Worry – Pharisees etch lines on people’s faces when they are not paying attention. Pharisees are terrified of the unknown.

But let’s be honest, we, like the Pharisees, appreciate an unchangeable nature in our religious life.

For this very reason, one commentator on this text called for compassion of the Pharisees. Perhaps their instincts were not unlike our own; just as our ordination vows call us to protect the peace, unity, and purity of the church, they were trying to maintain the meaning and the laws of their religious life. They think they’ve got

this no work on the Sabbath thing right. We still struggle with this because Jesus is calling to account holy practices in which one person's piety is another person's prison.

Since Jesus' time, religious folk have been disciples, which means disciplined in learning Jesus' way. The Sabbath is made for us, so says Jesus; how do we navigate new freedoms such as this? We are here in a Reformed worship service, we sing Psalms just as the Ancients did, as well as other scriptures and theologies that have been put to music since Calvin and Luther, but I would point out that if we had stayed strictly to our Reformation history, there would be no organ to accompany us and no stained glass for us to use as icons as we are moved to ponder the Word.

Rules, tradition, purity of intent are the way people of God have guarded against idolatry – every generation struggles with a kind of rigidity that feels safer than seeking new life in Christ. It takes discernment and discipline to live Jesus' way. Unfortunately, judgment becomes a fallback.

Of Judgment, Gendler says, he “does not like many people, but he loves a few very much” (10). Discipline on the other hand, “understands that the same structure which supports you can also hold you back. The bones of the skeleton which support the body can become bars of the cage which imprison the spirit. After Discipline has mastered a form, she is free to improvise” (11). Eating the wheat in the field is divine improv – an invitation to renewal and growth.

Back in my seminary days, two groups formed to debate whether Jesus came to start a new religion or to refresh and reinforce the old. They used only the Gospel of Matthew and had a week to prepare. It started in an orderly way as a debate should but the discipline and order of the process broke down as each side became more and more passionate in their rebuttals. Everyone in the class, those on both teams and those of us who listened and observed, agreed it was a tie. Eventually we came to talk about Jesus' mission, not in terms of a particular religion, but in terms of high octane service to God, which calls forth growth, not static rigidity. The Pharisees had this same debate amongst themselves and with Jesus – one discretion at a time in both in back rooms and public squares; their fury built over time. Whether it was a completely new thing or a reform of their faith, they didn't want it so they critiqued it all along the way.

As Gendler says, “Criticism is a strict father. He adores his children but fears their spontaneity. ... You can count on Criticism to have an opinion about everything. At his best, he surveys the distance between our intentions [and] our accomplishments, between what we are and what we could be” (28-29).

This thing about church law and pharisaical behavior is a lesson in both directions. On the one hand, we place the Pharisees and their complaints in the opposition column; we have chosen to follow Jesus and they were his greatest critics and eventually, real enemies. They worried, critiqued and were jealous (“Jealousy” by the way, “stands at the blue flame of the stove stirring obsession stew” (44)). But on the other hand, we are now the religious establishment; we hear Jesus' words, see his actions as familiar and comforting when what they are is “disturbing and disorienting” – they are still calling for a new world order and we, like the Pharisees were then, are meant to be leaders in that change.

So here's a short list of people and things that have more influence than religion in general and Christianity in particular. Oprah. The mall being open on Sunday/24/7 online shopping, sports leagues, fast food and all drive-thrus, global markets, right turn permitted on red after stop, casual Friday's and athleisure clothing, and technology (guns and money).

A couple of decades ago, Christians came up with WWJD – the What Would Jesus Do movement. I struggled with it as too simplistic (and possibly self-serving) – but I felt like a Pharisee; I saw it doing good but couldn't get onboard. Someone recently suggested that the question should have been, What Would Jesus Understand? He could know what was in the heart of a person, their intent, pain, struggles, ... were they approaching with a comfortable smugness, ...or humble confusion; Jesus would know before they spoke a word, even before being

in the same vicinity. We, on the other hand, have to listen to each other to know the pain behind the story, we have to pay attention to inequalities around us and watch for the one keeping quiet and not being heard.

This is the heavy lifting of our faith – regular gas won't get us there, it's high octane work. The idea is that we practice listening and paying attention here so we can continue to do it out there. Which brings us around behind Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees: justice and love were confronted by a false piety that day. We put rules and practices in place to keep us closer to God and remind us to serve God – but sometimes they become our god. When this happens, God becomes puny, soft, and benign.

So here's a thought, the Pharisee is just as withered and handicapped as the man but he was withered and handicapped in spirit. Jesus did not touch the man or make any gestures toward him; he didn't put mud made from spit on the hand or command any unclean spirits to come out – so did he break the law on the Sabbath? He simply said, "Stretch out your hand" and it was restored; it is an encounter with the living God. The Pharisee was offered the same encounter in that same moment, he was offered the same healing as a witness to the love and healing power of the living God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. That is what Sabbath is intended to tune us into – to be ready for the presence and the power of the Trinity. An encounter with the living God is the primary who, what, and why the whole Church and this congregation exist. We are because God is!

Here at the beginning of Mark – Jesus stands as a counterpoint – not the opposition – but the counterpoint to both sides and all sides; he is an invitation to high-octane faith, the kind of counterpoint that can make even love of enemies possible. The only difference between the man and the Pharisees is that the man's brokenness and vulnerability was visible and the Pharisees' was disguised by religious role, rules of piety, and outward appearances that substituted for qualities that allowed a genuine, risky encounter with God, Christ, and Spirit. Faith is not, as Carroll wrote, 'believing in 6 impossible things before breakfast' – it is to embrace the relationship between faith, doubt and cynicism and wrestle it out with God's laws and God's own inspiration that we might in-Spirit our lives and thus be a part of in-Spiriting the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.