

Week of April 25, 2021

Matthew 12:1-21

¹ At that time Jesus went through the wheat fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry so they were picking heads of wheat and eating them. ² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are breaking the Sabbath law." ³ But he said to them, "Haven't you read what David did when he and those with him were hungry?"

⁴ He went into God's house and broke the law by eating the bread of the presence, which only the priests were allowed to eat. ⁵ Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple treat the Sabbath as any other day and are still innocent? ⁶ But I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ If you had known what this means, I want mercy and not sacrifice, you wouldn't have condemned the innocent. ⁸ The Human One is Lord of the Sabbath."

⁹ Jesus left that place and went into their synagogue. ¹⁰ A man with a withered hand was there. Wanting to bring charges against Jesus, they asked, "Does the Law allow a person to heal on the Sabbath?" ¹¹ Jesus replied, "Who among you has a sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath and will not take hold of it and pull it out? ¹² How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! So the Law allows a person to do what is good on the Sabbath." ¹³ Then Jesus said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he did and it was made healthy, just like the other one. ¹⁴ The Pharisees went out and met in order to find a way to destroy Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus knew what they intended to do, so he went away from there. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them all. ¹⁶ But he ordered them not to spread the word about him, ¹⁷ so that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled:

¹⁸ Look, my Servant whom I chose, the one I love, in whom I find great pleasure. I'll put my Spirit upon him, and he'll announce judgment to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ He won't argue or shout, and nobody will hear his voice in the streets. ²⁰ He won't break a bent stalk, and he won't snuff out a smoldering wick, until he makes justice win. ²¹ And the Gentiles will put their hope in his name.

Law vs Love

My brother had a very short lived career as a police officer after he got out of the Marine Corps. While I don't remember much about that time, I have a very vivid memory of his graduation from the police academy. The graduation speaker (who knew there was a graduation speaker at a police academy graduation?) implored the graduates to use empathy when applying the law. He told a story of a traffic violation in which he pulled a woman over for not having her child in an approved child seat. The woman was beside herself and said she couldn't afford a booster seat. According to the letter of the law he should have written her a citation. But he knew that if she couldn't afford a child seat she couldn't afford the fine associated with the violation, and there was no justice in fining a young mother for her poverty. Instead of berating her or writing her a ticket, he let her know that the local fire department had seats they'd give her. He even escorted her there to make sure she'd arrive safely and got her set up with a seat so that her child would be safe and she wouldn't have to worry about getting a ticket in the future. I've thought about that story often, as it exemplifies the best of humanity - empathy, helpfulness, and kindness offered to someone in need.

While most people would agree that the world would be a better place if more people lived into the lesson offered by that police officer, it's not what happens. Too often humanity's desire for power and "being right" wins out. When the disciples plucked heads of wheat (or barley) from stalks in the field as a snack, it technically broke the commandment to rest on the sabbath since harvesting is work. It didn't matter to the Pharisees that they were not actually engaging in farming, but simply eating raw grain straight from the fields. Later the same Pharisees asked Jesus whether or not it would be lawful to heal on the sabbath. Again, healing is technically work, so technically breaking the 4th commandment. The logic behind Jesus' refusal to accept that he'd broken the law was simple - what does God truly desire, legalism and rigidity or mercy and love? The answer was clear, as spelled out by the prophets - God wants mercy and love, God

wants true justice. At the end of the day, love is the very heart of the law, so if the application of the law is not in love, then the law is not being applied. While law in this case is specific to "The Law" of the Torah, it can be applied to all aspects of our lives. The enforcement of all rules and laws should be merciful and grounded in love. Any law not rooted in the love of God and that which God has created, is not just, it's that simple. Of course, it sounding simple does not make it simple, which is why we are so divided over what defines things like "justice" and "law." While we may be in conflict over these things, we can't go wrong by simply following Jesus - showing mercy if someone is in trouble, offering kindness when someone is hurting, and using our God given gift for empathy.

Creator God - you have claimed us as your children, and we must confess that, like children, we can be selfish and apathetic. Help us to see how your gift of love created the world and all that is in it, how your gift of love restored the world when our sinful ways wreaked havoc, and how your love continues to be our guide. May we let your gift of love into our lives. In the name of Christ, who is your love embodied, we pray. Amen.