**Homily for JUNE 2, 2024 Mark 2:23-3:6 “Plucky Perplexity: Principles or People?”**

One sabbath Jesus and his disciples were going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the Bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.” Another time, he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” Then he said to them, “Which is lawful on the sabbath, to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

There’s a saying known round the world, that someone can be as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. You’ve heard that one? The analogy may be recent, but the truth behind it is as old as humanity. There are situations in all of our lives that make us twitchy, and nervous, and we are not our best selves when those emotions rule the roost. And this is *exactly* how the religious leaders of Jesus’ day are feeling as we join the story this morning. Nervous as long-tailed cats, they are, and Jesus and his plucky followers are the rocking chairs.

We are barely through the first couple chapters of Mark’s gospel, and already Jesus has the institutional religious folks so upset that they are trying to assassinate him. He has brought on this apoplexy in them by stretching, re-interpreting, or outright breaking rules that *they* hold sacred. He does this, we now believe, on good and ultimate authority, but they were not privy to our insights. What they saw was a dangerous meddler, a disrupter of the peace, a blasphemer, and one who had to be stopped if their ways and rules were to be upheld.

Adding to their discomfort is that Jesus is doing things that they themselves cannot duplicate; healings, exorcisms, and the like. And of course, he is saying things that show their conventional ways in a dated, negative light, with all his talk of not putting new wine into old, used-up wineskins, or not sewing a fresh unshrunk patch on a threadbare old garment. He is advocating for newness, rethinking, a fresh approach. And the long-tailed cats around him are getting twitchy.

I sort of know how they feel, having gotten to the age where I am throwing my hands in the air and asking, “Is nothing sacred anymore?” And that all comes to full flower in this morning’s story, where Jesus and his hungry, plucky friends are crossing a field of grain and decide to snack along the way, *even though* it is the sabbath, and such travel, *and* such harvesting, are against the rules. Finally, the Pharisees think, something less miraculous and more concrete; we can get him with this one: Jesus, why are your followers breaking the law? You pose as a religious teacher, but you and your disciples flaunt the clear commands of the scriptures. Defend these choices!

And Jesus, our plucky Jesus, defends with a story about their own revered King David, who sought nourishment for himself and his soldiers in the local temple, where they ate consecrated bread for the simple reason that they were hungry and without food. And then he utters one of his more famous sayings: that the Sabbath was made for us, not the other way around. And by extension then, the rules and regulations for Sabbath behavior should be in line with the *purposes* of the Sabbath, which are restoration and contemplation and healing after the labors of the week.

The second story is even more to the point; in that one, Jesus challenges the long-tailed cats directly, asking them which *should be* more lawful on the holy day, to do good or to do evil? To heal lives or to destroy them? And they say nothing, there is *nothing* to say, because they are caught, wedged between the obvious truth of what he says and the religious laws that say the opposite. Of course it should be allowed to heal and bless and improve things on the holy day! But those are not the traditions, and for these men, and many women and men just like them throughout history, the rules come first, whether they are just or unjust, whether they are sensible or arbitrary.

I think the key to understanding this scripture without descending into full bohemianism lies in the good judgement that Jesus teaches throughout his entire ministry. Of *course he understands* that everything flows more smoothly when we follow the rules. But he also understands that not all rules are good or fair or relevant, and that part of the plucky Christian’s task is to amend and upgrade and improve and, to use Wesley’s beloved category, to *perfect* our standards of spiritual living. And over and above all, for Jesus, is this recurring notion that the laws and the rules are for our improvement, not for our enslavement. Remember Abednego’s big speech last week? He gives God full credit for fairness and justice, and for giving us commandments that are designed to make our quality of life better. They were made that Life might be more functional, but as Life changes, then those parameters necessarily must shift, too.

Paul tells us that for freedom, Christ has set us free, and so I am particularly drawn to this quote from author Robert A. Heinlein. I suggest that this is the kind of freedom that Jesus would endorse, informed by prayer and spirit and a grounded spiritual life: “*I am free because I know that I alone am morally responsible for everything I do. I am free, no matter what rules surround me. If I find them tolerable, I tolerate them; if I find them too obnoxious, I break them. I am free because I know that I alone am morally responsible for everything I do.”*  Being morally responsible, not fixing blame, but charting one’s own best, studied, reverent ethical course…that is what earns us the title of ‘plucky’ Christians. Amen.