

## The Law as Rule

As a general rule of thumb, the first reading and Gospel text in the Revised Common Lectionary are related, they have a similar theme. Except for the first readings during the Easter season, the first reading will be from the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures. The second reading is usually from one of the letters in the New Testament and may be a semi-continuous reading from that letter. Sometimes the theme is very clear as it is in today's readings. That theme is about the Sabbath and what it means to rest and to keep it holy.

In today's first reading, we hear the part in Deuteronomy where Moses is reiterating the Ten Commandments for the Israelites. It is interesting to note that in the first giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, this commandment of resting on the Sabbath is connected to the creation story in Genesis 1 while this telling of the commandment is connected to God bringing the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Both times, however, the people are told to keep that day holy. Martin Luther, in his understanding of this commandment, said that we should keep the Sabbath holy by worshipping God and studying God's Word.

In the centuries after receiving this commandment, the Israelites tried to define what it meant to rest and not do work. Eventually, they defined 39 different categories of what was work and therefore prohibited to do on the Sabbath. For example, tying 2 strings together or untying 2 strings was considered to be work; the writing or even erasing of 2 letters was also considered work. A person could walk a certain distance before it was considered work, which is where we get the phrase a 'Sabbath day's walk.' Cooking a meal on the Sabbath was prohibited, but not reheating a meal prepared the day before. Harvesting and threshing were also considered work and this is to what the Pharisees took

exception with Jesus' disciples picking the heads of the grain in today's Gospel reading. Picking the grain was harvesting and in order to eat them, they had to rub the grains between their hands to remove the chaff, thus in effect threshing.

So why go from basically telling everyone not to work on the Sabbath to having 39 categories of work that cannot be done on Sabbath? Primarily, from the Genesis story, since God did not create anything on the seventh day, but rested, it was felt that the people should not 'create' anything on the Sabbath as well. By the time of Jesus, the religious leaders wanted to make sure that everyone followed the law and what was expected. They had the belief that if everyone followed 2 consecutive Sabbaths perfectly, then God would send the Messiah. To a lesser extent: it was to make sure no one got the upper hand in business dealings (Kinda like opening your store on Thanksgiving night for the Black Friday sales). What it came down to is that the religious leaders were focused on following the law with the belief that in following the law, salvation could be obtained.

Jesus comes along and brings the focus back on the original intent of the law, in this case on the Sabbath law. If you will recall, when God first gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, it was to protect and promote positive relationships between God and the people and between each other. The law keeps people from focusing exclusively on themselves and what they can take from others.

In the synagogue, Jesus is not referring to a literal life and death situation, after all, the guy with the withered hand wasn't in imminent danger of dying because of his hand, but on a more spiritual level, his relationships with family, friends and the community were affected by it.

This raises the question, do we need to be whole, that is, no bodily imperfections in order to have proper relationships with each other? If that is the case, then why doesn't Jesus heal all of our 'withered hands'? Why do we see people who are blind, in a wheelchair, or have various physical conditions? We have seen that people in these situations are often gifted with gifts that 'normal, whole' people do not have and they can show us how to related to each other in a different way. There are many reasons for this. Because of humanity's sinful nature, life does not go the way in which God wants it to go. We see in Psalm 81 that because of humanity's hard-heartedness and turning away from God, God leaves us to deal with the consequences of humanity's poor decisions. We need to also keep in mind that Jesus' main mission was not to heal the 'withered hands' but to save our souls. Healing the man was Jesus' way to show us how far astray from God we went by focusing on following the law and not focusing on the relationships. The point of Jesus healing the man with the withered hand was not to say that we need to be physically whole to have the kind of relationships that God desires, but it is more of not being bound by the law. We were not created by God to follow the law, but the law was given to us to protect ourselves from ourselves and to teach us how God wants us to live in community. We can put aside the requirements of the law in order to preserve life, to help relationships.

This is not to say that we can just ignore the law and do whatever we want to do in order to get what we want. There is a need for the law. It brings order to society and protects those who are most vulnerable from being taken advantage of. It also shows us that we are not able to follow all the law all the time, that we cannot attain salvation by our own efforts. Just as the Pharisees' efforts to get everyone to follow all the laws for two consecutive Sabbaths in order to 'make' God

send the Messiah was not successful, we see we cannot hope to be able to follow all the law all the time. This then leads to the law pointing to Jesus as the way to salvation.

The danger of making too many conclusions based on this one story in the Gospel is that it would lead us to wrong impressions of how we must be in order to follow Jesus. Instead of being concerned with a person's 'withered hand' we should be concerned with the person themselves - who they are and what they can do instead of what they cannot do. We should not get mad or angry at God or Jesus for not healing our own 'withered hand' but to see how Jesus has fulfilled the law for us so that we can relate to others in the way in which God intended us to do. In other words, we look outward to the needs of others rather than inward to obtain our own wants and protect the 'stuff' that we have gotten from others.

As with most other Biblical texts, we need to keep the framework of the whole Biblical story around this text to be able to see the bigger picture of what God is doing through Jesus for us. This story is not about a withered hand, but about not letting the law dictate how we are to respond to other people's needs. Resting one day a week, taking a Sabbath from our daily work helps to take the focus away from our own efforts of living and helps us to refocus upon the One from whom we receive eternal life. May the Holy Spirit lead us in a day restful, life-giving Sabbath, thanking God for all that God has given us and seeking where God wishes to take us.

YouTube Links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/9P4GbA8wf5A>

Service: <https://youtu.be/BGsNdPYZHJO>