

**SPEAKING OF MIRACLES AND MORAL AUTHORITY; MARK 2:26-3:6; 6.3.18
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

There's a growing conversation about moral authority. I was standing in a receiving line the other day with a man I know who is an avid golfer.

I asked how often he gets out to play; about forty times a season he told me but some play eighty or ninety times a year. Like our president, I asked, half kiddingly. To which he responded, he doesn't play that much, when does he have time? He's the president. And by the way, my friend said, I'm a supporter. I said I thought it was well documented that Mr. Trump paid regular visits to his golf resorts in Virginia and Florida and that I was not a supporter.

You know, he said, there is a certain moral hypocrisy among those who do not support the president. Look at previous administrations and he started with George W. Bush and went back to Bill Clinton, LBJ, and JFK suggesting that their peccadillos placed them in the same company as our current president. You didn't mention Barak Obama, I noted. To which he said, oddly, Obama didn't have the opportunity.

By this time any red-blooded American would have rolled up his debating sleeves but I looked at this man whom I regard not as a close friend but a friend, he works hard at his profession, has been successful, is utterly committed to the improvement of Buffalo, graduated from a fine university and has a professional graduate degree. He is an old school gentleman and always asks about the members of my family, each by name. And, I know that he has experienced profound grief.

What was there to be gained by arguing about how many times the president plays golf each week? Sure, we could have drilled deeper into substantive matters of the president's personal moral conduct and the moral/ethical dimension of his policies but by this time we were standing in front of our host and had to acknowledge her. Nor did I feel eager to rehearse the litany of what are in my opinion the president's crimes and misdemeanors.

Yet, as I reflected on that brief discussion with my friend I was grateful for being reminded that all supporters of the president do not walk around with pitchforks in their hands and horns growing out of their heads. As polarized as the current political climate is there is nothing to be gained by demonizing each other.

Which is, I'm afraid, what we've done with the Pharisees. Today's story is a good example. The charged exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees in the wheat field and then again in the synagogue in Capernaum casts a nefarious light on this deeply devoted, highly educated first century religious party.

In fact, contemporary Presbyterians have more in common with them than with Jesus' first disciples. At least our stereotypes match up better with these buttoned-down, frozen chosen than they do with Jesus' ragtag recruits.

The point is if we can avoid slinging mud on the Pharisees we might even recognize ourselves in some of them. First the exegesis then two comments and a challenge.

Today's story takes place on the Sabbath. Jesus' disciples were in a field plucking grains of wheat because they were hungry. The Pharisees criticize Jesus for permitting his followers to violate the rules that prohibited work on the Sabbath.

But since the disciples and Jesus were on the road, away from their homes where their meals would have been prepared the day before they were entitled, according to Jesus' reference to David, to glean wheat from the field even on the Sabbath and satisfy their hunger. Jesus then interjects some common sense and says the Sabbath was made for humans not the other way around.

The Pharisees' objection, however, is not unfounded but it is based on a lesser authority than Torah. There was ample precedent in the Mishnah—the vast compendium of rabbinical interpretation of Torah—that supported the Pharisees' objection to the disciples gleaning wheat.

It is important to remember first century Jews in Palestine lived in an essentially non-Jewish and often hostile environment. Observing the practices of their faith like kosher dietary laws, circumcision and the rules regulating activity on the Sabbath became, for the leaders, more of a rigid practice heightened by survival as an oppressed minority than a faithful observance of the law.

Sabbath observance had always been at the heart of their identity as faithful Jews. It helped them resist the pressures to conform to the broader society. It was an ordering feature of their life that provided stability and was a mark of the integrity of their faith.

Yet, given non-Jewish threats to their community and Jesus' threat to their status and authority, the issue became one of adhering to the letter rather than keeping the spirit of the law. It was first a subtle then a radical shift from letting the law guide them to using the law to insulate them from the outside world – a shift of which they were unaware yet to which they became self-righteously committed. Not unlike overly zealous patriots. The result compromised their moral judgment.

The plot thickens when the second confrontation occurs. This time Jesus and his followers enter a synagogue where there was a man with a withered hand. It is still the Sabbath. Jesus had already healed a man here just a few days before. He did so by telling the man, who was a paralytic that his sins were forgiven. This caused the Pharisees to wonder by what authority Jesus forgave the man his sins and gave them the charge of blasphemy they would later use to trap Jesus.

In today's healing story Jesus is back in the same synagogue, but this time on the Sabbath and the Pharisees suspect he may heal the man with the withered hand, violating a second time the prohibition of activity on the holy day.

Jesus senses their suspicions and asks them whether it is proper to do good or ill and to save life or kill on the Sabbath. Their silence is self-incriminating. Angry at their hardness of heart Jesus tells the man to stretch out his hand and when he does his hand is healed. Jesus recasts the faith in moral/ethical terms – doing the right thing on the Sabbath transcends simply adhering to the laws restricting activity on the Sabbath. Morality trumps legality.

Now the two points and a challenge. The first point this: true religion always chooses the right thing to do over blind adherence to the law. We are now witnessing a growing moral/ethical religious movement for social justice that includes people like William Barber, Gene Robinson, David Brooks, Sister Simone Campbell and many others. This movement looks at policies and politics through the lens of doing the right thing for our neighbor and our planet.

This moral/ethical social justice movement brought new acceptance and long delayed rights and freedoms for LGBTQ people; it's the movement that is fighting for affordable health care; it's the movement that questions the distribution of wealth when 30% of the population is living near or in poverty including children; it's the movement that is pushing for the shift to alternative fuels; and it's the movement right now that objects not to common sense immigration laws but the unacceptable policy of separating children from their parents who cross the border.

Also, finding powerful expression and support because we are beginning to see things through a moral/ethical lens are the #Metoo movement and gender equality. Today's NYT reports that though federal laws overseeing gender equality for organizations receiving federal funding have been loosened by the Trump administration many conservative Christian colleges and universities are fighting court battles with female employees who allege workplace discrimination.

Commenting on Roseanne Barr's racist tweet transgender writer Lindy West wrote, "slavery is not our distant past; it is yesterday. Descendants of slaves have never been compensated for the hundreds of years of unpaid forced labor upon which white Americans built generational wealth and economic stability.

The culturally, legislatively enforced poverty, subjugation and mass incarceration of black people continue to this day. Racism is our defining sickness.

Treating anti-political correctness arguments as anything but a shell game props up the lie that it is somehow unfair to point out racism, let alone fight to eradicate it. Political correctness is just people reacting to other people; parents protecting children; the oppressed and underserved advocating for themselves. Canceling "Roseanne" is not society regulating "mean" speech; it is us regulating our collective morality, so that we don't atrophy into a moral vacuum. It is saying no, because we are more than animals.

Marilynne Robinson has also taken up the moral/ethical conscience in our national psyche doing one of the things she does best – recovering our lost history.

She traces the impact of 19th century Puritanism on the status of women and blacks by people like Emily Dickinson, Charles Grandison Finney, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and many others plus institutions like Mt. Holyoke, Amherst and Oberlin Colleges, Lane Theological Seminary, and Yale Divinity School.

There is a rich undercurrent in American religious and secular culture that bodes well for the days ahead if we can reclaim our vision for moral/ethical justice.

The second point is that Mark's Sabbath debates are not just some long ago event encapsulated in history. Most of us can probably remember blue laws prohibiting business on Sunday; and dry laws preventing the purchase or serving of alcohol.

Someone asked the other day who the "competitors" of Westminster were – meaning what other churches vied for new members – my answer was it really wasn't other churches as much as it is all the options and demands competing for our attention on Sunday morning.

And because we're Americans and often don't know when to stop working Monday and the week ahead often barge in on our plans for the weekend. Indeed, more than a few of you come to church *from* or leave church *for* the office.

Something equally dramatic is taking place with our children. Sports leagues demand more time and money – from Sunday morning practices to weekend trips to other cities – having your child participate at even less-than-elite levels can put a strain on the resources of time and finances of any family; not to mention compromise the role of the church in the child's moral/ethical and spiritual development at a time when kids are facing moral/ethical decisions at younger and younger ages.

None of this is new. By now we've made accommodation to the juggernaut of secularization just another bending or stretching of our already schedule-contorted lives. One member of this congregation says she's planning on retiring to Italy because the pace of life there is so much more humane.

We see the downside all around. People no longer stop for stop signs; I heard a national radio host interview a bestselling author as they enjoyed a moment of gallows humor about the rarity in either of their lives of un-medicated sleep. The faster we go the more pills we need. Life expectancy has plateaued and even declined for some cohorts.

I suspect our moral/ethical reflection lags behind our jammed packed, fast-paced lives. The lure of resume building and short term gain for success defined as material abundance lets us put our moral/ethical questions aside. How long do we have to use sleeping pills or blood pressure medication to prop up our unhealthy living?

And what's in it for our kids? The harder we push, the more pressure they feel: to achieve, to measure up, to get into some elite university, then get the 'right' job, that is conform to some image that is driving them. Is it *their image* of success? Does it make *them* happy? Are they aware of what *they want*?

I don't think we're taking as good care of ourselves physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually as we should. Church is an appropriate place to raise these questions because God's intention is for each one of us to experience wellbeing and abundant life and to work for the wellbeing of our neighbor. So here's the challenge: How can we consider the moral/ethical issues of our leaders and their policies without considering the moral/ethical implications of our own everyday lives. My friend who supports Mr. Trump would not disagree. If we call Jesus Lord and Savior keeping the Sabbath holy with the same rigor, integrity and spirit he did would be a good place to start. Amen.