

June 2-3, 2018

"Jesus the Provocateur"

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The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 2:23-3:6

Deut. 5:12-15; Ps. 139:1-6, 13-18; II Cor. 4:5-12

How hungry do you have to be to eat raw grain right off the stalk? As Jesus and his followers were walking through a farmer's field, they were hungry enough to eat the raw grain they plucked. Is this what poverty looks like? Hmmm...

A few years ago, I joined the kids in my Kansas City youth group for their mission trip, an experience very similar to the kinds of trips our St. Lucas kids make, but this experience began with a poverty simulation for the first 3 days. Having packed for a week, we were loaded with stuff and as soon as we arrived, we were separated from all that we brought with the instructions we could only keep any 5 items we wanted to keep. Want to have a comb for your hair in the morning? That's 1 item. Want a change of clothes? Every item of clothing = 1 item; A hat? = 1 item; a towel? = 1 item; Toothpaste and a toothbrush? = 2 items.

More than our selections of personal items, we were taken outside to the backyard and instructed we were sleeping outside – no beds, no cover, nothing. Want to keep the bedding you brought? a pillow, or a sleeping bag? = 1 item each; what about a sheet? = 1 item. Got it? = 5 items! The rest of our stuff was locked up and we were immersed in a life of poverty.

We were also given "money" (more like vouchers) to get us through the weekend in the form of 10 points. We had choices, but not enough points to cover all our meals. Breakfast the next morning cost 5 points. Some took it, some did not. Some skipped breakfast and saved their points for other needs. I chose the breakfast. When breakfast was served, we received a can of Coke and a bag of chips as that was the usual meal of many who live in poverty – junk food bought at the gas station since there was no grocery store in the neighborhood where we lived.

During the morning session, hungry whether you bought breakfast or not, we explored the issue of domestic poverty, vital stats, & how poverty affects the young. For the afternoon, we were turned loose in the neighborhood where we were told that our small groups were to "get lunch" while we were out. No money, no suggestions about what to do; we were left to our own devices. My group walked around for a while until we determined we were desperate and went door-to-door asking for food. It was humiliating and some were obviously challenged by the raw bluntness of asking a stranger for food. Finally we scored the makings of simple sandwiches from a very humble older couple, who gave us a loaf of bread and a package of lunch meat, but not enough food for us to get over the hungry feeling we were all experiencing. Not only did we "get lunch," but we were locked

out to kill the afternoon on our own. We had to stay together but we didn't have anything really to do. Do you realize how tiring this was?

I've been thinking this week about Jesus and his disciples and their itinerant life and about them getting into trouble with the religious leaders, the Pharisees, who ignored their obvious hunger and accused them of breaking the Sabbath laws. Jesus and these pious upholders of the law locked horns over how the law should be interpreted and applied.

This story is relived in every generation over how the community of faith looks upon the code of conduct expected of the community.

What rules exist in church (rules we don't post anywhere) that should be known by someone new? Do we have a code of behavior? Do we have expectations for one another? Do we have a dress code? Since they're not written down anywhere, the only sure way to identify these codes is for someone to break them, some unknowing person who doesn't see the trip wire and then is reprimanded for breaking one of them.

If we're like every other church, what are they? What are the rules and regs and who is authorized to enforce them? Do we have a rule about certain clothing, certain standards for men and other standards for women?

When do the rules themselves become a burden for those who don't know these obvious truths? I grew up hearing one shouldn't ever lay something on top of the Bible. Odd, I don't remember being taught I should read the Bible, but more importantly, I was taught to not lay anything on my Bible. In my generation we learned men should never wear a hat indoors and certainly not at church. We wouldn't have thought wearing shorts in church was ever proper, but today this is the season when this might happen, even on Sunday morning. I was also taught to stand and put my hand on my heart during the singing of the National Anthem. I was even taught to sing along but not many do this anymore. With all the brouhaha about peaceful protests during the National Anthem at pro games, I think we've confused the symbols of patriotism from freedom itself. These are not signs the world is going to Hell in a handbasket, they're just signs the world has changed.

From its beginning, Israel's practice of faith was understood as "keeping Torah," which included observing the Sabbath and other holy days and maintaining the sacrificial system. The rabbis equated faith in God and obedience to the Torah, both the written and the oral teachings. This was the understanding in the religious world in Jesus' time.

From then to now, not much has changed. The written law we have in our Bible but we did not grow up as Orthodox Jews and so most of that old system makes no sense today. But obviously there's more. The oral interpretation would be those unwritten rules only the "insiders" know. What about the outsiders? Where do they get these rules?

Across the span of his life, Jesus expressed a very positive attitude toward the law and claimed he came to fulfill it. Yet as far as the Pharisees were concerned, Jesus was a law breaker on all those occasions such as we read today (plucking raw grain, healing on the Sabbath, eating with sinners, etc. etc.). All these conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders centered on this basic conflict on the interpretation of the law. Oy, those who live by the law, die by the law.

So the great irony of how the hyper-enforcement of cultural and so-called holy arguments was that the Pharisees were so upset about his blatant disregard to their interpretation, they pulled aside and held a private discussion of how they would destroy him. To be absolutely clear, on the Sabbath, they plotted his murder. The power of irony is how it is blind to those of whom it describes: viz., they can see the speck in your eyes but they can't see the plank in their own eyes.

Jesus the provocateur had only one rule he wants us to uphold (just one, single, simple rule): Love. As far as Jesus was concerned, if people love God and love others, they fulfill the law. Jesus taught us to take our character from God who is merciful and good even to those who disregard the so-called rules. Jesus taught us to show mercy and goodness and even to love our enemies.

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