

## Change

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*Texts: Matthew 12: 1-8*

At that time, Jesus passed through a farmer's field during the Sabbath; and his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck ears of grain and eat. The Pharisees saw this and said to Jesus, "Look: Your disciples are doing what it is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." And he said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? How they entered the house of God and ate the bread of [divine] presence, although David and his companions were not permitted to eat it, not being priests? Or have you not read in the Law that during the Sabbath the priests in the Temple "profane the Sabbath" and are guiltless? But I tell you that something greater than the Temple is here. But if you had known the meaning of 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Thanks be to God for these words of life.

Let us pray. Blessed God, thank you for these words of life. May my words now reflect your Word for us here in this place and time, with all we bring to the table, our hopes and fears, gratitude and anxieties, large and small. May your Spirit dwell in us richly through your Word. Amen.

A few years ago – well, okay, I'm getting old, it was many years ago - Arby's launched an ad campaign using the slogan, "Different is good." Never has a company claimed something so dumb, or at least something that people disagree with more. In general, we humans don't do well with different. Scientists will tell you that, neurochemically, "different" triggers the production of adrenaline and cortisol, which are the primary human stress hormones, while "same" or "familiar" trigger the production of dopamine, the primary hormone of well-being and happiness. This is why you are, right now, probably sitting in the same pew you always sit in, why your morning routine today was probably very similar to many previous Sunday mornings, and why being in an unfamiliar place among unfamiliar people may be exciting, but is also stressful. If that's you this morning, we are glad you are here, be at peace, you are welcome. Sadly, this human response to "different" is also, at some basic level, part of why racism is so hard to overcome, and why America is so polarized, not just politically, but residentially – more and more we move to where people think like us. Clearly if you look at the history of human fear and violence, Arby's "Different is good" slogan couldn't be more wrong.

Feeling the weight of how difficult "different" is might help us understand what is really going on in today's scripture reading from Matthew. This passage is about difference: specifically, the difference over time that we call change. If you listened to that passage without experiencing the anxiety that leads to the release of stress hormones, that's not surprising, because it can be tough to catch the tremendous change that is at issue here. I use the word tremendous in its older meaning, its root meaning, which is something that causes you to tremble, tremble.

It's hard for us to feel the weight of it, but the Sabbath was a fundamental aspect of faith in Jesus's day. Our ancestors in faith lived in precarious times, dominated, not just politically, but culturally, in every

which way, by the Roman Empire. Culture is often shaped by what the majority takes for granted, and is reinforced by grand public signs and subtle pedestrian signals. First century Jews, like Jesus, lived with Roman flags on every street corner, holidays devoted to the gods, images of the emperor on the coins they needed to buy bread, and, among countless other subtle realities, an eight-day week. Long story short, living under foreign domination, it was a struggle for them to remember who they were.

In Jesus' day, one of the primary strategies for trying to help Jews remain Jews was the Sabbath. If you could shape people who didn't work one day out of seven, who grounded that day of human rest in the day of divine rest, and in your story of salvation out of slavery, if you could shape the rhythm of people's lives so that they were always out-of-sync with the dominant culture – well, then they just might remember who they were. Sabbath would help them hold on to their identity in a relentless world. And although this wasn't exactly true to history, any common Jew of Jesus's day would think their people had been observing the Sabbath week in and week out, year after year, empire after empire, all the way back to the seventh day of creation.

And Jesus looks to be messin' with that. He's gone from preachin' to meddlin' as they say. In fact, it looks like Jesus is engaged in something close to non-violent civil disobedience here. He's pickin' a fight. If the Pharisees can see him, then he can see them, and he just goes right ahead and picks the grain even though it's the sabbath. In the Pharisees view, that's not allowed, and never has been, it's not the way we do things. Not for some narrow, legalistic reason that puts scruples above reason, but it's not allowed because, as the Pharisees would say, as goes the sabbath, so goes our identity. We can't hold back the relentless pressure of foreign identity if we lose the sabbath.

If you are a first century Jew, or perhaps a 21st century follower of the Jewish rabbi named Jesus, you have to be wondering what Jesus is up to here. And not just wondering, but feeling pretty anxious about it. The stress is rising: the adrenaline flowing. This man is threatening our identity. This blatant disregard for the tradition, this religious disobedience, why? Why indeed? Non-violent direct action is about change, but the question is, what change is Jesus after?

To get at the answer, let me take a step back here. If any of you are scholars of 12th century Italian religious orders, which in this congregation you may well be, please forgive any historical inaccuracies here, but I once read that in medieval villages catholic nuns showed solidarity with poor struggling women by wearing the same clothes as the poor women wore: simple black or brown dresses made from common cloth, heads covered, no frills. Their very clothes said to the poor women they served, "We see you. We are with you." Through the years, however, guess what? Clothing changed. Poor struggling women in Italian villages, and Haitian migrants in Ohio, and women holding signs on street corners, no longer wear simple brown dresses made from common cloth, heads covered, no frills. They are more likely to wear second-hand jeans, sweatpants that help them keep warm, t-shirts or coats that come from the back of our closets. And, at least in 1950, what were nuns known for wearing today? Simple brown dresses made of common cloth. Many religious orders had been doing the same thing for 700 years. Their clothes no longer said "We see you. We are with you," but just the opposite: "We are different than you. We are separate from you." In the post Vatican 2 era, it took great courage, but most women religious have changed in order to say again to those they serve, "We are with you." Sometimes, in order to keep doing the same thing, you have to do things differently.

And that's what Jesus was trying to do for his people. What change was Jesus after? The change of doing the same thing God had called them to do since the dawn of creation. Sabbath, and tradition in

general, had become something to be served, rather than something to serve the purposes of God. Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath, as Jesus so radically said. Radically. That word, as I imagine has been pointed out here before, didn't mean crazy far-out change, but it meant getting to the root of something. Getting to the core. Getting to what really matters. And, Jesus, ever the brilliant communicator, ever the marketing genius, ever the moral visionary and master of the sound bite – to get at what really matters he reaches back eight centuries and quotes the word of God from the prophet Hosea: I desire mercy, not sacrifice. I desire mercy, not sacrifice, says our God.

This is a time of change in our congregation. Things are different now, and they will be different tomorrow. One of my jobs as interim pastor is to help you through that change, help you experience a little less anxiety in the midst of it. Some of you as individuals are already right there with Arby's: Different is good. Bring it on. Others maybe not so much. But either way you are individually, the truth is that as an organization, as a system, change is hard. No matter what change is proposed, or is happening, some part or another of the system is going to resist, is going to work to keep the equilibrium of the system. So, as I seek to help you through this time, I'll try to point out when that is happening, and I might even, lovingly, respectfully, push back a bit. A little micro religious disobedience on my part you might call it.

The thing that needs to guide us all through this time is a desire to be radical. A desire to get to the root, the core, the essential elements, of what we are trying to do here. We will be going through a process to welcome all voices into answering that very question, and in some ways the answer will certainly be unique to this congregation, shaped by the individuals who are here and the history we share together. But I would express the common goal of it all to be this: to remember who we are. To remember that we are followers of Jesus, servants of the God who calls us to mercy in all we do. If there is anything that drives us into the future, anything that is mission critical for us as a congregation, anything that leads us to welcoming others to the marvelous journey of faith, we've got to continue to remember who we are. To do the same thing we have always done, the thing we are called to do, there will be things to highlight and celebrate and invest in even more. There will be things that need to be celebrated for what they were, but let go of if they no longer reflect who we are. There will be new ideas that need to be evaluated to judge whether they will help us do the same thing we have always done, even though everything around us is changing.

Friends, no matter how we respond to the claim that different is good, the reality is that different is inevitable. Change is inevitable. Let's respond by being radical. Let's work together to get ever closer to the heart of who we are and what we are about in the world today.

In the name of the Living God, the one who was, who is, and who always will be with us. Amen.