

Rule bound or living in liberty?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 3 June 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 2B

1 Samuel 3: 1-10; Gospel: Mark 2: 23 - 3:6;
Poem: "I look at the world" by Langston Hughes

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

It wasn't until I sat down to write this sermon yesterday that I remembered that we'd already had that Hebrew Bible reading, the story of old Eli and young Samuel, once before this year. Looking at it again, this time placed alongside the reading from Mark's gospel about Jesus' disruption of the Sabbath teachings, I saw something I hadn't noticed when we read it in January. At that time, I was looking at it in terms of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, as a story of God's call on his life – and on our lives.

But, looking at it now, I remembered that Eli had expected the next leader of the nation to be one of his own sons. In the story, Eli's increasing blindness wasn't just physical. It was symbolic of his leadership. He was blinded by love and attachment to his own sons who were scoundrels, who in the words of the text, "*had no regard for the Lord,*" and who abused their priestly privileges and position. For Eli, the hearing and advent of God's Word through the call of Samuel wasn't comfort and light, but drastic change, almost destruction, of that which was awry.

Both the reading from First Samuel, and the gospel in Mark, challenge the authority of the religious leaders - and invite us to see the Sabbath and the rules around it differently. Both the Samuel story and the Mark story remind me of Marianne Williamson's provocative claim that if you ask God into your life, God doesn't show up with a little interior decorating or sprucing up, but God arrives like a wrecking ball to tear your world down to its foundations and start over.

I wonder if Eli suspected that, if he helped Samuel hear God's Word, that would prove to be the final blow against him and his own family's failed leadership. Sometimes, following the call of the Sacred will cost us enormously. Sometimes the church is called to let the wrecking ball do its work as God calls us to be, not the place we love for its stability and beauty, but maybe something we don't even recognize yet.

So how can Mark's gospel help us chart a different course in our own lives, and in the life of the church?

But, first, I want to name and challenge the ways that this text has been used to sustain Christian anti-Semitism. Christians have too often told the story of Jesus' brushing off the criticism of his followers gleaning and eating wheat on the Sabbath, and his own healing of the man with a withered arm on the Sabbath, as a contrast between the Christian gospel of love and the heartless legalism of Judaism.

Christians have often used passages like this one to interpret the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, casting contemporary Judaism in the role of the misguided Pharisees and religious leaders who actively precipitated Jesus' execution. This approach has contributed to our shameful legacy of anti-Semitism, to hatred and to violence.

In reality, Jews have never permitted observing the Torah to override decisions to save life. The historical Pharisees knew that Torah – and knew that it was made for humanity.

Jesus' argument, that breaking the Sabbath to serve life and liberation, was not a novel argument. In fact, when he notes that the purpose of the Sabbath has always been to serve humankind (as opposed to making humankind serve some stern religious principle), he is essentially restating the Torah in Deuteronomy 5:12-15, in which God institutes the Sabbath so a people who once toiled in slavery can enjoy at least a modicum of rest.

Rabbinic traditions dating to a century after Jesus, if not earlier, expressed opinions similar to his words in Mark 2:27, including: "*The Sabbath is handed over to you, not you to it*" and "*Profane one Sabbath for a person's sake, so that they may keep many Sabbaths.*" (In Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

The proper function of the Sabbath was to promote life and to praise the God who brings liberation. Everyone in Jesus' Jewish community knew that.

I think that perhaps what riled the Pharisees was not so much the teaching but the teacher. The Pharisees understood the Sabbath, but they did not appreciate that it was Jesus, this new and uppity interpreter of scripture, who was dispensing legal insights.

They would have been scandalised by Jesus' assumption that somehow he and his calling were comparable to David and David's calling. And declaring himself the "ruler" or "lord" of the Sabbath could be tantamount to claiming that the law's ultimate purpose is to serve Jesus. This is the scandal: he presents himself as no ordinary teacher.

So, rather than contrasting Judaism and Jesus, it is more helpful if we understand this story as a conflict between the One who brings the good news, the liberating word (on one hand), and the religious authorities who have a more rigid way of understanding religion; this is a phenomenon that exists as much in our time as it did in the time of Jesus.

Debi Thomas points out that "*The religious leaders (Pharisees) in this story are not a stand-in for Judaism. They are a stand-in for all convictions, values, traditions, commitments, doctrines, absolutes, proclivities, preferences, and essentialisms — no matter how cherished, noble, or well-intentioned — that stand between us and compassion. The things that stand between us and compassion!*"

In other words, the question this story asks is not, *“What was wrong with 1st century Judaism?”* but rather, *“What have we — here and now — frozen in time (ossified) at our peril? What mortal, broken thing have we deified instead of love? Who or what have we stopped seeing because our eyes have been blinded by our own best intentions?”*

The passage emphasizes a commitment to life and vitality, compassion and love, that abide at the heart of God’s reign. It also illustrates how religious commitments and values -- any religious commitments and values -- can turn rigid and turn oppressive in the hands of careless stewards. Form this, no-one is immune.

What are we clinging to that is not of God?

This story ends at the cross, as it often does when hardness of heart rules over compassion and care. The cross reminds us that the most noble motives can be perverted. It points out how quickly an institution can become an end in itself, stifling legitimate concerns of those outside who seem to threaten stability.

Reflecting on this passage brought to mind the decisions that are before the Uniting Church at present, about marriage. The proposals that are coming to Assembly (in the second week in July) will, if they pass, allow ministers to officiate at the marriages of same-sex couples. (Also ensuring that Ministers who do not want to do this will not have to.)

For many of us, this looks like the dawning of love and liberation. For others in the church, even for some who are basically supportive, it is frightening. At the last Presbytery meeting, the report from Standing Committee to Presbytery described the proposed inclusive understanding that marriage is relationship between two people (instead of the current wording of between ‘a man and a woman’) as a ‘pastoral and missional risk.’ A pastoral and missional risk!

I don’t move in the right circles to hear this first hand, but apparently many ministers and congregations have said that they will not be able to remain in the Uniting Church if the proposals are agreed. A letter has been sent out from the Assembly of Confessing Congregations - and someone has even started an appalling petition on change.org to demand that the leadership of the Uniting Church not make this decision.

The first three chapters of Genesis are quoted in the letter and the petition as the once and for all time definition of marriage - in God’s joining in relationship Adam and Eve, a man and a woman – despite the fact that Genesis doesn’t actually mention marriage at that point.

I am not surprised that very conservative people take this position. What I did find surprising and disappointing at Presbytery is that people in leadership are bolstering up this fear instead of focusing on leadership that will provide liberation and compassion and hope.

(This is not true of everybody in the Uniting Church! There are people who are doing wonderful work to bring us to Assembly into a good honest and justice focused conversation. And I am grateful to them – including our Moderator, Simon Hansford, who will be leading a forum at St Stephens Church this Wednesday night.)

Mark's gospel illustrates how frequently insidious forces that we scarcely notice can transform the best-educated, best-intentioned among us into insensitive leaders, desperately out of touch with what is real.

For surely the far greater missional risk is that as a church we will be seen to be beholden to tradition and rules, rather than to love and to the in-breaking of new insights into the being of the God of love. Of far greater risk to our mission is that the wider community outside the church will see us close our doors and fail to offer a place at the table for LBGTIQ people.

It was this kind of insensitivity and brokenness that moved Jesus to grief in the synagogue when he considers the stony, closed hearts that regard rules and tradition as far more valuable than removing suffering and disadvantage before the sun goes down.

But Mark's Gospel also has good news to announce for us. This story of the in-breaking reign of God!

The story also tells of compassion and transformation. Jesus, like the God who instituted the Sabbath, is committed to preserving life; to preserving life in all its fullness. His ministry will expose the oppressive and corrosive tyrannies of fear, imperial pretence, and religious hypocrisy, wherever they reside. And, he assures us that God's spirit will deliver us from them.

So, in this season of Pentecost, the Spirit promised by Jesus is with us, blurring the clear and simple lines of our settled scheme of things, calling on faith and hope and risk; calling us to trust, daring us to danger, to trial and to take risks.

Mark's gospel tells us that in reviewing the rules,

and in asking whom they serve,

yes, there is risk.

But it is risk that gives life,

risk that transforms,

risk that brings life and love.

For this vision, for this hope we share, thanks be to God.