

**2 Pentecost  
June 3, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation;  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus;  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Although it seems to me like it happened a year ago, it has been just two weeks since Prince Harry married Meghan Markle in a grand wedding at St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle. I watched part of the wedding, mainly to see the Right Reverend Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church ... our Episcopal Church ... preach at the service.

Bishop Curry's sermon was simple. It was about love. God loves all creation unconditionally. God calls each of us to love all creation. Love is power. Love can change the world.

These are some of Bishop Curry's words from that sermon:

*There's power in love. There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can.  
There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There's power in love  
to show us the way to live.*

In this week's reading from Mark's gospel we hear the story of a two-part confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. In part one, Jesus and his disciples are walking through a grain field on the Sabbath. When they get hungry, the disciples pluck a few heads of grain to munch on, Jesus doesn't stop them, and the Pharisees pounce, asking Jesus why he's allowing his followers to break the Sabbath. Jesus answers, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

In part two, Jesus enters the synagogue, and meets a man with a withered hand. Knowing that he's being watched, Jesus asks the Pharisees whether it's lawful to "do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill." But the Pharisees refuse to answer. Angered and grieved by their hardness of heart, Jesus heals the man with the withered hand. The story ends, predictably, with the Pharisees leaving the synagogue to plot against Jesus's life.

Traditional interpretations of this story pit a rigid, legalistic Judaism against Jesus. But I believe that reading lets us off the hook too easily. First of all, it equates the Pharisees with all of Judaism and therefore takes on an anti-Semitic tone. The Pharisees were a relatively small sect of very devout, but highly literalistic and rigid Jews. They had a very strict interpretation of all the 613 Mitzvoth ... all the laws that are found in the Torah.

Jews today span a broad spectrum of practices related to those 613 Mitzvoth. Secular Jews ... those who claim Jewish heritage through their ancestry, but who are not part of a Jewish faith

community, usually don't pay much attention to Biblical rules that govern Jewish life. On the other end of the spectrum ultra orthodox Hasidic Jews live strictly by the Sabbath and Kosher rules. They cannot even throw a light switch on the Sabbath, or cook a meal. If you shop relatively high-end kitchen stoves today, you will find those that have a feature to program surface elements and ovens to turn on at specific times on the Sabbath, thus avoiding the simple, but strict, law about "work" on the Sabbath.

But, the Pharisees in this story are not a stand-in for all of Judaism. They are a stand-in for all the convictions, values, traditions, commitments, doctrines, absolutes, proclivities, and preferences ... no matter how cherished, noble, or well intentioned ... that stand between us and compassion. In other words, the question this story asks is not, "What was wrong with first century Judaism?" or ultra orthodox Judaism today, but rather, "What have we ... here and now ... in our own lives today ... made inflexible 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? What are we clinging to that is not God? What are we clinging to that is not love?"

We do an injustice to the Pharisees if we write them off as bad people. They were good people ... good people trying to preserve and protect those things ... laws, rituals, traditions, habits ... that facilitated their faith for them. Don't we do exactly the same thing when we hold fast to our favorite worship practices, or our cherished spiritual disciplines, or our beloved daily rituals, the laws that rule our lives? Don't we just as readily decide what is sacred in our own lives, and then refuse to budge even when those things become obsolete and lifeless? The Pharisees were not wrong to uphold the Sabbath. They were absolutely right. But rightness is not love. Rightness is not compassion. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then here is a prime example. Rightness will never get us to Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath. Only compassion will do that. Only love can do that.

Again the words of Bishop Curry,

*There's power in love. There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can.  
There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There's power in love  
to show us the way to live.*

For several weeks I have been telling you the saga of Dining With Dignity and the disruption caused by one person's objection to the location of where we share food with our homeless neighbors. This attorney is acting like a modern day Pharisee caught with the strictest adherence to the municipal law. This is the difference between "rightness" and "loving your neighbor." Even if it is breaking the "law," serving my homeless brothers and sisters food is not the first time I have been outside the laws, but doing what is "right" in the name of God ... in the name of love.

In many ways the story in Mark's gospel is unnerving. It's a story about Jesus walking through the sacred fields in our lives, and plucking away what we hold dear. It's a story about Jesus seeing people we're too holy to notice, and healing people we'd just as well leave sick. It's a

story about a category-busting God ... a God who turns the world upside down ... who will not allow us to cling to anything less bold, daring, scary, exhilarating, or world-altering than love.

Jesus healing a man's withered hand on a Sabbath. Why would anyone bring the business of a synagogue to a grinding halt on a Sabbath morning? Why would a man risk his own life to heal a stranger's withered hand?

Remember, nothing is more sacred than unconditional love shown in compassion. The true spirit of the Sabbath ... the spirit of God ... is love. Love that feeds the hungry. Love that heals the sick. Love that sees the plight of the invisible in our society. Love that hears the cries of anguish from those people we would rather be silent in our world today. Love that pays attention to the needs of those unseen people ... those out-of-sight-out-of-mind people ... wherever they may be. Those people on our borders with Mexico ... in the detention centers that separate children from their parents ... in the devastation of cities in Syria ... in the jungles of Burma ... and right here in our own backyard. If we truly want to honor the Lord of the Sabbath, then we have to put in true perspective all the practices, loyalties, rituals, and commitments we personally value ... even the ones that feel the most "Christian." We must always remember that those practices, loyalties, rituals, and commitments are a means to an end ... they are not the end themselves. There is only one absolute, and it is love.

Again, the words of Bishop Curry from the pulpit in Windsor Castle at a grandiose wedding of a royal and a commoner a couple of weeks ago:

*Love is not selfish and self-centered. Love can be sacrificial, and in so doing, becomes redemptive, and that way of unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love, changes lives. And it can change this world. If you don't believe me, just stop and think or imagine. Think and imagine, well, think and imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families when love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce when love is the way. Imagine this tired old world when love is the way, unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive.*

Bishop Curry continued:

*When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields down, "down by the riverside to study war no more." When love is the way, there's plenty good room, plenty good room, for all of God's children. Because when love is the way, we actually treat each other, well, like we are actually family. When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all and we are brothers and sisters, children of God. My brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new world, a new human family.*

Remember, nothing is more sacred than unconditional love shown in compassion. The true spirit of the Sabbath ... the spirit of God ... is love. Love that feeds the hungry. Love that heals the sick. Love that sees, hears and attends to the invisible. If we truly want to honor the Lord of the Sabbath, then we have to put in true perspective all the practices, loyalties, rituals, and commitments we personally value ... even the ones that feel the most “Christian.” There is only one absolute, and it is love.

Finally, although these words are not from that sermon in St. George’s Chapel, they are from Bishop Curry:

*Love the neighbor you like. And, love the neighbor you don’t like. Love the neighbor you agree with, and love the neighbor you don’t agree with. Love your Democrat neighbor. Love your Republican neighbor. Your black neighbor, your white neighbor. Your Anglo neighbor, your Latino neighbor, and your LGBTQ neighbor. Love your neighbor. That is why we are here.*

Amen.