

“A Prodding Presence”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Psalm 139; Mark 2:23-3:6

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I suspect most of us know, or have known, the kid always being sent to the principal’s office. Perhaps that kid was or is us! Usually a boy, he is not violent, but sometimes the things he says offend others, and the things he does breaks rules, but no one is harmed. For him, it just seems to be one thing after another. It is not unusual for the principal to ask, “Did you really have to say that, again?”, or “Couldn’t that have waited?”

This morning, that “he” is Jesus, and in the early chapters of Mark, he is stirring things up. Last week he offended the scribes by eating with tax collectors and sinners. Then, his disciples don’t fast when even though the radical John the Baptist’s followers do. As I shared last week, fasting was not just about keeping ritual, but it was a way to mark Jewish identity in the face of oppression by the empire of Rome.

This morning, Jesus is back in the principal’s office, this time for failing to follow the rules of the Sabbath. The law outlined the do’s and don’ts of the Sabbath, including being precluded from working. I recall in college living next to an Orthodox Jew who would not turn on his light switch from Friday evening until Saturday because that was considered work. He did not object if his roommate did.

As with fasting, Sabbath keeping was as important for marking and maintaining Jewish identity, as it was about following ritual. Yet, even in Jesus’ time, Sabbath regulations had exceptions. In particular, if a person was in a life threatening situation, the prohibition against working on the Sabbath was waived. Sustaining life had priority over maintaining rules. I share this because in our lesson, the two incidents about the Sabbath do not seem to be life threatening situations.

In the first, the disciples pluck grain to eat out of a field on the Sabbath, but there does not seem to be an urgent hunger. In the second, Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath and sees a man with a withered hand. This was not the beaten man, left for dead on the side of the road, who the Good Samaritan helped when others passed by. The man with the withered hand could well wait a few hours to be healed, until the Sabbath ended at sundown. “Jesus, couldn’t that have waited?”

As a lifelong Presbyterian who enjoys we are sometimes known as a church that does things “decently and in order,” I am tempted to side with the Pharisees in what we are about to hear. Yet, this is Jesus who is again in the principal’s office as the Pharisees question him, and because it is Jesus, and we believe Jesus speaks truth, we pay attention, especially when we realize this is the only time in the Gospels when Jesus is said to be angry.

Let’s hear what makes Jesus angry in Mark 2:23-3:6.

²³One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ²⁵And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." ²⁷Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

My eight year-old laptop computer has seen better days – days when I typed the letters "a" and "s" and they would actually appear on the screen. Now, I have to push hard and at the right angle for those letters to appear – push too hard and multiple letters appear. There are other quirks as well, including that the XP operating system is no longer supported by Microsoft, the hard drive is full, and the computer shuts down if plugged in, except when it is in standby mode allowing the battery to recharge. I replaced the old laptop a few months ago. It came with Windows 8.1, about which I had heard horror stories and which indeed baffled me; so, I kept going back to that old laptop, banging on the "a" and "s", thinking I will just wait for the release of Windows 10 in late July, and just learn it.

Now I will admit, in the midst of my confusion and frustration, I did not offer up my technological bafflements to God in prayer, though I was tempted to use God's name at the height of my frustration. The fact is, I don't expect God to be clued into Windows 10, much less help me learn it. Yet, perhaps I am shortchanging God.

There may be times we think of God as a wonderfully kind grandparent – loving and caring, even if a bit strict or old fashioned at times. This grandparent has for the most part has decided there really isn't a need to learn a lot of new technology, though that thing called Facebook is curious. In fact, we often like when grandparents and grandparent-types maintain a distance from current generational trends. I think we may hope God maintains this distance as well.

This is where I find Psalm 139 to be telling about the nature of God. I might drive myself crazy trying to learn about Windows 10 or figuring out the instructions for a new tool, or installing a new purchase. In reading Psalm 139, it is as if in the midst of racking my brain, I take a breath and look up, and God is there; not with an instruction manual or tool kit, just there, and without words says, "I am with you."

Not only do I look up and see God, but I imagine a little smile indicating God knows more than is let on. I don't think of God as claiming credit for Windows 10 per se, but that smile suggests being in the presence of the one whose creative genius planted the seed of all human ingenuity.

The psalmist expressed, “I could no more count [your thoughts] than I could the sand, and suppose I could, you would still be with me.” This makes me think of going to the beach, when upon arriving home there is the oft-uttered phrase, “There is sand everywhere” – from the car’s carpet to between one’s toes to everywhere in between. One cannot escape the sand, and one cannot escape God.

Now, in one sense an inescapable God sounds fine, but let us note the psalmist is stressing the mystery of God’s thoughts and presence, not God’s control. The difference is important.

Probably next month, this congregation will elect what is called a pastor nominating committee, also known as a search committee. Resumes from many pastors will be received to review. As with other churches, Presbyterians talk about “call,” both in terms of a pastor feeling called to serve a congregation and a congregation sensing the pastor is called to serve it. So, at some point in the process, someone will no doubt say, “The pastor nominating committee’s task is to find the person God has already called to lead us.” Now this sounds well and nice, but I have my concerns about the theology of this. For one thing, by saying God has already chosen someone, I think we are locking God into a decision we can’t be sure God has made. I also wonder who would want to serve on a committee where the responsibility is to tap into God’s thoughts and decisions and locate that one chosen person. I find the psalmist’s words instructive, “Such knowledge is beyond my understanding, a height to which my mind cannot attain.” Our goal is not to somehow figure out God’s thoughts as one would a puzzle, but to welcome and enjoy this wondrous God’s presence. For the Pastor Nominating Committee, as well as a church session, it means keeping a seat open for God’s presence by the Spirit at all its meetings.

Now this ever-presence of God can cause problems. Sometimes, as we shared in our prayer of confession, we don’t want even God aware of, much less intruding on our actions or thoughts. Beyond that, the idea of God’s ever-presence can lead to a sense of fatalism, that all our actions are predetermined by God and therefore our own thoughts and passions lack meaning. That is not the presence the psalmist expresses.

Clearly, the psalmist is marveling at the vastness of God’s thoughts, like the grains of sand, and the mystery that such a God would choose to be present to the psalmist. The psalmist gives no indication of having tapped into God’s thoughts; if anything, doing so is beyond the psalmist’s understanding. As one has written, the psalmist is in awe that “God is waiting for the poet in all places and times.”

There may be times we wonder about this ever-present God. We may have felt someone’s assurance, “Remember, God is with you,” fall short because, at that moment, we did not sense a divine presence. It may be receiving word one’s job is being terminated and one is stressing at the probably financial implications. It may be during the struggle of a relationship coming to an end, or the news of cancer or other serious disease, that God’s presence seems distant at best. In the inner cities of this country or other parts of the world, hunger, street violence, displacement and migration, and racial and ethnic discrimination can all lead to asking, “Where is God?”

Not sensing God's presence can even cause us to feel guilty. We have been taught people of faith should feel God's presence at all times, in the great highs and the deep lows. My own belief is God understands the harsh realities of life can cause us to feel very much alone, even abandoned by God. The power of Psalm 139 is God is waiting wherever we go. God's knowledge of the psalmist, a knowledge beyond the poet's understanding, is not a means of control, but a source of peace. God's desire is to be in relation with us and will wait for us. There are no barriers God cannot transcend to be present to beloved humanity.

There are ritual barriers Jesus is confronting in the early chapters of Mark's Gospel. His defiance of accepted rules and rituals are what seems to put him in the principal's office, being asked, "Couldn't that healing have waited a few hours to the end of the Sabbath?" Obviously, Jesus' action of healing the man with the withered hand answered the question, "No, it could not wait." That's our challenge.

Sabbath keeping is important. It identifies us with the God who rested on the seventh day of the Genesis creation story. Sabbath allows space for the breath of life to be restored in us when we are running at full speed the rest of the week. Yet, honoring the Sabbath is more than just not working, it is reconnecting with our God who seeks to be in relationship with us. Keeping Sabbath enables us time and space to recognize ways we have created barriers and missed realizing God's ever-presence, God's lingering at our tables, God's waiting for us.

I think Jesus would concur with the importance of Sabbath keeping. In his own ministry, he took time to move away from crowds and disciples to pray alone. What I think Jesus saw was Sabbath keeping itself had become a ritual barrier to God's presence. Yes, the man with the withered hand could wait to be healed, if the decision was based solely on whether it was a life threatening situation.

I think Jesus believed the restriction on healing on the Sabbath had created a restriction on God's presence. So, in that synagogue, I see Jesus becoming the ever-present God of Psalm 139. Even though this man had not asked for healing, he should not be kept from the divine presence by a human-created restriction. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Jesus was rewriting what it meant to keep the Sabbath holy, and left people with the question, "Who truly honored the Sabbath this day?" For Jesus, faith keeping trumped Sabbath keeping.

The painting on the bulletin cover is not directly linked to the text of Jesus' disciples gathering wheat on the Sabbath. Yet, the artist tells of beginning his painting with the yellow background and then trying to figure out how to paint the wheat, which in the end turned out to be black, not yellow or gold. He wrote that a friend admired the painting in the artist's studio. Walking home, the artist asked his friend the color of the wheat. "Yellow," the friend replies, "Wheat is yellow." Then, the friend paused, realized he was not sure, and the two returned to the studio and confirmed the wheat is black against a many hued yellow background. [Pohl, Frances Kathryn, Ben Shahn, (Pomegranate, 1993), p. 114.]

There are times we are so sure of what things like the color of wheat is to be, we fail to take a second look. There are times we are so set in our ways as to how Sabbath is to be honored, so sure of what it means to do things decently and in order, so convinced of what the Bible says, we may even resent a healing if it goes against our beliefs or rules or rituals. Yes, sometimes cultural change tempts us to accommodate our faith beliefs to current trends and we are wise to be attuned to such temptation; on the other hand, we may also discover our faith beliefs are themselves shaped by cultural trends and not biblical truth.

As we traverse this journey called life carrying with us a provision called faith, may we be open to watching for Jesus to show us the way of faith keeping in new ways. And, let us celebrate the wondrous mystery of the psalmist's God, who waits for us to look up from such busyness as figuring out Windows 10, and we sense a presence and see a smile that says, "I am still with you."