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Here's a little secret about me. I am naturally disposed to favor the underdog. That is why I can't bring myself to root for the Yankees. I enjoy watching them play, and I love the way the team comports itself, both on and off the field. But I just can't cheer them on. I confess that I make an exception to my "root for the underdog" rule when it comes to the University of Connecticut's women's basketball team. Of course that is perfectly justifiable, since to be a Husky fan is to partake of a little bit of heaven. I reveal this to you in order to explain why I feel moved to show some love to the Pharisees who keep popping up in Scripture, and especially to the synagogue leaders in this morning's Gospel lesson.

To be sure, the Pharisees were "overdogs" in 1st Century Palestine. But they are often treated as pariahs by us 21st Century Christians. Perhaps that is because Jesus frequently tangled with the them. He also couldn't bring himself to root for the overdog. Plus, he had a severe allergy to hierarchy and authority. I'm pretty sure he would have had a hard time getting ordained in the Episcopal church. That said, the standard rap against the Pharisees is that they were narrow-minded and legalistic, that they exalted form over substance, and that they were full of themselves and intent on preserving their own power.

This characterization is largely false. As the biblical scholar Sarah Dylan Breuer sagely observes, the "Pharisees [were] so often in conflict with Jesus in the canonical gospels NOT because ... [their] ideas and way of life were antithetical to ... [his], but because they [and he] had so very much in common. They (unlike most other Jews in the first century) read prophetic texts like Isaiah as scripture. They (unlike the Sadducees) thought that scripture and its injunctions must be interpreted using our reason in light of changing circumstances. Both the Pharisees and Jesus believed that ... prayer and holy living ... [in daily life] were at least as important as anything that went on in the Temple."

Of course, much of the contemporary disdain for the temple authorities stems from their role in bringing Christ's life to an end. And as much as I like to be a contrarian, I am not about to defend the Crucifixion. However, I don't think that we can't know for sure what motivated the authorities. Were they solely intent on self-preservation, or were they largely motivated by a sincere belief that they were doing what was right?

Returning to the scene in this morning's Gospel lesson, I think that we should take seriously the possibility, I would even say the probability, that in seeking to uphold that rule against healing on the Sabbath, the religious leaders were trying to do what they thought was right. They were not just making up rules for rules sake, nor were they caught up in the mindless exercise of their own authority. Rather, like the Pharisees of our time, those who of us who occupy the best seats in the Temple and wear fancy clothes (gesture to my vestments), they were simply trying to do God's will as best they could.

They were well versed in Scripture, including of course the 10 Commandments. The Fourth Commandment is particularly relevant this morning. "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it." Exodus 20: 8-11.

And if the Prophet Moses were not sufficient authority for the Temple leaders, they also were especially attentive to the Prophet Isaiah, whose words were intoned from that very lectern a short while ago. "[Thus saith the Lord]. If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth."

Of course, neither Exodus nor Isaiah specifically addresses the issue of healing on the Sabbath. It fell to the religious leaders to craft rules and regulations to flesh out the laws. Kind of like the rubrics in our Prayer Book, those instructions in tiny italics that we Episcopalians treat as if they were the Word of the Lord, even though they are our own inventions, crafted in the good faith belief that they apply the Word in ways that are faithful to God's will. Even if we think that the Pharisee's rubric prohibiting healing on the Sabbath leads *away* from God, it does not mean that the leader of the synagogue was less than faithful in insisting that

the rule be enforced. This is not a situation in which someone is trying to trick Jesus, or to lead him into a trap. The rabbi may have simply not been very good at interpreting the rules in light of the particular circumstances facing him.

Besides, it is not as if Jesus made an unassailable case for narrowing the rule, or waiving it, or creating an exception to it. His analogy to giving water to a donkey on the Sabbath doesn't really hold up. After all, the health of the donkey could be seriously compromised by dehydration, especially during the heat of the Palestinian day, whereas the health of the women in this morning's lesson would not have been put at risk had Jesus waited until the next day to heal her. She had been already been living with the condition for 18 years. Jesus easily could have invited her to come back on Sunday. She would not have felt shunted aside since the issue of healing would not even have come up Jesus not spontaneously decided to lay hands on her. Another truth is that Jesus did not always heal those who came to him in need. How could he? He would have been healing people 24/7 with no time for teaching and preaching and prayer. We know from Scripture that he often sought to escape the insistent crowd, heading into the desert or up a mountain in search of solitude.

So, then, what are we to make of this morning's lesson? If nothing else, it teaches us that God's law is meant to be lived into, and not just understood. Simply parsing the words is not enough. Nor is blind allegiance. There will always be gray areas, questions of interpretation, judgments that need to be made. And there will be circumstances that teach us, if we are willing students, that our sincere interpretations have impeded God's ability to set the world aright.

We are all like the leaders of the synagogue in that we are sometimes so rule-bound that we become incapable of noticing when the rules we hold dear are getting in God's way. We Episcopalians in particular have a penchant for becoming so attached to our rules and so fixed in our understanding of them, especially rules regarding worship, that we lose the capacity to tell how they affect others who do not share our tastes or preferences.

God's law is meant to be lived into, and not just understood. For in the living of it we develop the wisdom and insight and sensitivity to make sure that we've got

the music right and not just the notes. In the living of it, we acquire a righteous mind and a righteous heart. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it this way. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Hebrews 8: 10. When Divine law becomes an integral part of *who we are* rather than a list of things we are supposed to do, it becomes much easier to chart our path. We experience the Commandments, the rules and the rubrics not as a means of controlling our behavior but instead as a means of deepening our relationship with the Almighty.

"Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." How do we live this out rather than simply obey it? After my very first Sunday at St. Ann's, as I was driving home to New Haven I noticed that I was about to pass Exit 63 on the highway. Now that might not mean much to you, but to me it means Clinton Crossings Outlet Mall. Fortunately, I was traveling in the right hand lane and there was no car on my tail. I slowed down, flipped on my blinker, took the exit, and within a couple of minutes pulled into a parking space.

As I "prepared to exit the vehicle" as they say on t.v. crime shows, I realized that I was wearing my clerical collar. "Should I keep it on or remove it," I wondered. My initial response was that I should wear my collar into the Mall as way of reminding the religious slackers there that this was the Lord's Day. But this thought was quickly followed by the realization that these very same slackers might well wonder what a man of God like me was doing hanging out at the Mall on a Sunday. And then a third thought: What *was* I doing hanging out at the Mall on a Sunday? I wish I could report that I immediately started up my engine, headed for home, and spent the rest of the day on my knees, deep in prayer. But the truth is that I took off my collar, headed into the Mall, and among other things purchased a great pair of Crocs.

When I mentioned this little adventure to Ken Kraus a couple of days ago, he said in his wry Ken-like way that Old Lyme is noted for its *inlets* rather than its outlets. He then described a lovely pattern that he often follows on Sunday afternoons. He stops by a favorite store after church to pick up fixings for a picnic, he loads up

his kayak with food and other provisions, he paddles around in the aforementioned inlets, eventually puts in on an island, and then eats supper while taking in the splendor of Creation. My immediate response was “Now that’s what I call holy!”

It is indeed important to set aside particular times and particular places in which to mark the Sabbath. But it is equally important to develop the capacity to experience holiness in the messiness and ordinariness of everyday life. This includes when we are brushing our teeth, or shopping at the discount mall, or transporting our kids to soccer, or playing soccer ourselves if we are a kid (or a very fit adult). If the fourth commandment is written in our hearts, it becomes for us a guide for holy living rather than an inconvenient command from on high. More important than *where* we spend our Sundays (or Mondays or Tuesdays) is *how* we spend them. What matters is our orientation, the mind and heart that we bring to whatever we do. After all, if we are in church all day but our heart is stony and our mind preoccupied with trivial things, are we really observing the Sabbath?

What matters is whether we exhibit an attitude of gratitude. Whether we are grateful for all that God has given us, especially the things we take for granted, including life itself. Whether we see Christ in all whom we encounter, including the sales person at the Mall even if she seems to be studiously avoiding us. We abide in the Holy when we celebrate our own incarnation, including the fact that we are able to move about from place to place. And if we need assistance in getting about, the fact that we have that help is itself cause for celebration. We engage in Holy living when we appreciate the beauty of Creation, human as well as Divine, whether it is a beautiful inlet or an perfect omelette, a well-turned phrase or a well-turned double play – even one from Jeter to Cano to Texeira. “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.” Amen.

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