

“To protect and serve”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Mark 2:23–3:6

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

In 1970, psychologists at Princeton University decided to test compassion. They gathered 40 seminary students in a hall, and then sent them across campus, individually, to give a speech on the story of the Good Samaritan. As each student crossed the campus, he came upon a man lying in an alley, coughing and groaning.

How many of these future pastors do you think stopped to care for this man?

Of the 40, only 16 stopped to help. One of the seminarians even stepped over the groaning man to get through the door. More than half of the seminarians did nothing. Why?

It turns out that some of the students were told they were late and had to rush across campus to give their speech, while others were told they had plenty of time to spare. Almost all of the students who stopped to help were the ones *not* in a hurry. Only 10 percent of those who thought they were late stopped to help. It wasn't that they were uncaring; they simply felt beholden to a more pressing responsibility.

How many of us have said, “Oh, I would love to help more if only I had the time, if only I didn't have all these other responsibilities”?

The Torah tells us that long ago God heard this complaint and gave us a gift. God gave us Sabbath—one day, every week, when we have time enough to worship God, be in community, and help each other. No work. No hurry. A day free of all those other responsibilities. A day just for love.

As a Jewish man, Jesus observed the Sabbath. He may have challenged its interpretation and practice, but he never questioned the value of the law itself. It was a day when former slaves celebrated the freedom to have no master but God—no responsibility but the joy of life. It was a day for tambourines and song. A day for compassion, when all were equal and none worked, not laborers, not servants, not even animals.

The Sabbath was part of a tapestry of law designed to protect and serve the community and its prioritization of God and justice.

Our own laws today are not so different. The founders of our nation celebrated their hard-won freedom with a Constitution designed to protect and serve the people of their fledgling nation. They created laws intended to further life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

At the time, their definition of the people protected by those laws was woefully narrow, excluding millions based on race, gender, and wealth. The dream of this nation is to see the day when “We the people” includes, serves, and protects *all* the people.

That dream, and these laws, are what make our community, our nation, possible.

But something's gone wrong.

Certain laws seem to have become more important than the people they were supposed to protect and serve.

The Gospel of Mark tells the story of Jesus entering the synagogue to worship God on the Sabbath. In the shadows, Jesus spots a man doubled over in pain, grasping his withered hand. Jesus invites him into the center of the room, where all can see him. Jesus asks the people to look at this man who needs help. He asks them to care enough to say or do something, even if it means bending the law and “working” on the Sabbath. And all he gets is silence. The people turn their heads and look away.

Jesus is furious. This is the only time in all four Gospels when this Greek work *orgé* is used to describe Jesus. In every other instance, it's used to describe the wrath of God. But here Jesus himself is moved to rage. He looks at these people, these law-abiding citizens, whose hearts have hardened with indifference, and he is grieved.

Something's gone wrong. Today, on this Sabbath, we stand in a sanctuary, with Christ asking us to look. To see the youth of our nation who carry the withered names and faces of the friends gunned down in school shootings, in movie theaters and churches, on streets and byways. To see the mother, the father, gripping the casket of their child. To hear their plea: “Not one more.”

And imagine his rage when we look away, when we are more outraged by a school walkout than by a school death.

Last week, students from the Parkland high school where 17 people were shot and killed earlier this year staged a “die-in” protest at a Publix grocery. Shoppers stepped over the bodies of these teenagers to reach milk and fruit, while counter-protestors shouted derision at children who simply *do not want to die*.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus staged a similarly symbolic challenge to the laws of his time, not out of disrespect for those laws, but out of the conviction that they were meant for something better: meant to protect and serve.

Parkland student David Hogg says, “What a lot the media... has messed up with me is they've made it seem like I'm trying to take away people's guns — that I'm against the Second Amendment. My father is a retired FBI agent. I have guns in my house. I'm not against the Second Amendment.”

The youth of our nation care about a law that was created to guard them against tyranny and violence, to protect and promote their welfare. They understand and honor the intent to ensure the right to form state militias that keep and bear arms. They're not asking that all guns be taken away. They're just asking that we remember why the Constitution was created in the first place: to protect us. They're just asking that it be allowed to protect us still, because clearly right now it's not.

Today, let us hear Jesus once again proclaim that the law was created for humankind, not humankind for the law.

Today, Jesus sees again that man who carries his pain, his withered hand, like a boulder at his side. Watch as Jesus calls him forward. Jesus makes him visible. Jesus tells him to put his hand forward. And as he stretches his trembling hand into that silent space, all of humanity puts its hand forward. He is healed, and with him, we are healed.

In that moment, Jesus restores more than a hand. He restores the original purpose of the law, of Sabbath: a day for compassion, for people, for God.

Christ can do the same for us today. He can help us see the people who are not being protected and served by the law. He can soften our hearts and help us respect the law by respecting the people for whom the law was made.

I don't pretend that such love will give us all the answers when it comes to ending gun violence or challenging implicit bias or protecting our freedom. There remain complex details to be debated and resolved by a collaboration of all—conservatives, liberals, everybody bringing their wisdom to the table. Together, we *can* find a way to protect both our freedom and our lives. Because the question is not: do we choose law or people? The question is: how do we shape the law for the people?

I know there are hardened hearts out there in the world, but I suspect, or at least I hope, that many of us are simply like those seminary students rushing past the groaning man in the alley. It's not that we don't care; it's just that we think we have a different responsibility.

Today, God stops us in our tracks, on this Sabbath, to show us the one and only priority of the law: to serve and protect. If we let him, Jesus will reorient us back to the people, to the man groaning, to the hand withered, to the stomach yearning with hunger, to the teenager crying for their friend. Our eyes, and our laws, must never swerve from them. They are *all* that matter.

Amen.