

Teachable Moment #1: Reinterpreting “Good”

Mark 3: 1-6

3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand.
2 They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3 And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” 4 Then 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. 5 He 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. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Imagine yourself entering a store. It could be any retail store or grocery store. You need to pick up a few items. After you walk through the sliding glass doors you look around and notice people. Some are wearing masks, some are not. As we observe, in our minds we begin to formulate a judgement about what we see. We group the mask wearers and non-maskers into categories. Good or bad. Safe or unsafe. One of us or one of them. When it comes to grouping our brains are well-oiled machines. It comes naturally. It’s instinctive.

In the gospel story we notice the Pharisee are watching Jesus on the sabbath waiting to see what he will do. Our bibles tell us they are waiting to “accuse” him. But the Greek word is *catēgōrosin* which means “to categorize.” The Pharisee are waiting to put Jesus into a category: good or bad. Safe or unsafe. One of us or one of them. By the time this short story is over they are so fed up that they want to destroy him. It’s quite the dramatic leap from wanting to categorize someone to wanting to destroy them. So what could Jesus have done to create such rage in them?

When we skim the surface of the story it seems rather obvious: Jesus heals on the sabbath. He broke Moses’ law in front of law enforcement. And for years that is how we’ve read this story. But there is so much more happening in these six verses it’s remarkable. So let’s unpack it.

Start with Jesus being watched. Their eyes are locked on Jesus. He knows he is being watched so he turns to a random man with a withered hand and Jesus thinks to himself, *Alright, I’ll play along with the Pharisee’s game and perhaps this can become a teachable moment.* So he calls the man forward. And please notice: the man doesn’t ask to be healed. The man is simply a prop for the rabbinic lesson. Then Jesus assuming the teacher role asks the Pharisee a question: “Is it lawful to do good or to harm on the Sabbath? To choose life or to choose death?”

Well, our ears should be ringing because we’ve heard these options before. We hear Jesus plagiarizing Moses’ final sermon where he tells the people there are two paths set before them: one leads to life and the other, death. “Choose life,” Moses says. Jesus is flipping the script as he

is asking them to categorize themselves. And if they had simply answered the question, perhaps the story would have ended differently—with the Pharisees wanting to take Jesus out to lunch or something. But instead, they remain silent. Why? Because Jesus is challenging their understanding of themselves. You see, they categorize themselves as the “good ones,” the “godly ones,” the “chosen ones.” And Jesus is asking them, “Are you really?”

It happened to me when I read Layla Saad’s book *Me and White Supremacy*. In it she says that the group most dangerous to people of color are not the obvious racists with Confederate flags, but the well-intended, self-proclaimed progressives who have convinced themselves that they don’t need to do the work of untangling themselves from white supremacy. The ones who say, “At least I’m not like them.” “I voted for Obama” or “I have friends who are Black” or “I send my kid to a diverse school.” She says what makes this so dangerous is that we become attached to being the good one, pointing to the obvious racists and it creates a blind spot in us which convinces us that we are innocent and therefore don’t have to do the work. I have to admit when I read her words, I got frustrated, because she challenged my understanding of myself as the good one.

Jesus challenges the Pharisee’s understanding of themselves with a question: is it lawful to choose life or death on the sabbath and their response is silence.

But it’s what Jesus does next that really infuriates the Pharisee. It says Jesus is grieved at their silence and their hardness of heart. We are given a big clue here. Now who else do we know who has a hard heart? Pharaoh! The bad guy in Jewish folklore. He is the worst! And suddenly Jesus teleports them back into the story of Egypt with all the signs and plagues and he reinterprets the drama for them making them characters in the common Exodus story.

Jesus looks at the man with the withered hand and says “outstretch your hand.” Well, who commands Moses to outstretch his hand? God—the deliverer—who tells Moses to do the same thing when he performs the signs. Jesus assumes the role of the deliverer. Then the man stretches out his hand and he becomes released—he becomes Israel—the chosen of God. And what about the Pharisee...who are they casted as in Jesus’ reenactment? Jesus says, “You think you’re the good guys. The spiritual heirs of Moses, but truthfully you are not playing the part of Moses, you are playing the part of Pharaoh—using what is meant to be freeing as a weapon of control against God’s children. And, by the way, if you want to upset a Jewish leader to the point where they want to destroy you, just tell them their interpretation of what is good is false and then call them Pharaoh! It’s brilliant and threatening.

So wonder what Jesus would say to us today about the American interpretation of Christianity. What would he say about the illusions we’ve portrayed of ourselves as being the good ones. What would he say about a Christianity which has taken what has meant to be good and liberating news, and used it as a weapon of control against God’s children. A Christianity which coddles the privileged. Which defends militarization. Which categorizes others while believing themselves to be good. In a time when everyone sees themselves as the “good ones”—and I mean *everyone!*—I wonder: what would Jesus say to us today and what character in the story he would assign to us?

Jesus challenges our understanding of ourselves and our attachment to being good. It's a teachable moment for us all. And please know: my temptation is to tell you that this is a church I believe to be full of good people. To categorize you and place you in the "good" group. But that would only defeat the purpose of the story, wouldn't it? And so here is a blessing instead: may we be less attached to being good and more attached to choosing life in all its ways. In the name of the liberating Christ, Amen.