

HOLIDAYS

Wedgewood Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

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June 25, 2000, Pentecost Two, Year B

Talk about Holidays vs. Holy Days -- they're not very holy anymore are they?

Talk about "Good Shabbot".

The wonderful film, *Haunted Honeymoon*, with Gene Wilder and Gilda Radner, begins with a scene where an old woman is killed. Then the wig blows off and you realize it's a drag queen. He raises his head and says tortuously, "It's not what it seems," and then slumps back down seemingly in death. Then his head pops up again and he says in a more explanatory tone, "Well. It's kind of what it seems but not really. Oh, it's so complicated." Then he falls again for the final time.

God sent Samuel to anoint the new king. When the eldest son came before him, Samuel saw a strong man. He looked on a resolute, fit, no-nonsense man who looked like a leader. David, on the other hand, was sensual, ruddy and handsome, attractive. He looked fine and even Samuel could tell he was beautiful. The scripture says he "had beautiful eyes". The classic Hebrew euphemism for beauty.

In Samuel's old and not so beautiful eyes, David was completely unsuitable to be king. He was too pretty, too tan, too attractive. He'd never do. Who would take him seriously? Now the eldest - Eliab -- he was a man who'd hold your attention. There was a man who looked like someone in charge. He looked like a president, a senator, a king.

But God says to Samuel, "Do not look at his commanding appearance or at his impressive height, because I have rejected him; for Yahweh does not see as humans do. Humans look at outward appearance, but God sees the heart."

It's not what it seems. Well. It's kind of what it seems, but not really. Oh, it's so complicated.

What is a sabbath?

In the past, there has been much argument on exactly when the sabbath really is. "Sabbath" does not mean "seven" no matter what some might say. It most likely means something along the lines of "cessation, ending, or completion". Traditionally, however, the Sabbath was and is celebrated

by the Jews on the seventh day. In our time, most Christians celebrate the Sabbath, if at all, on the first day, but many have chosen the seventh day in honor of tradition.

But, at least for me, when one celebrates the sabbath just really doesn't engender much excitement. I find it hard to get up a sweat over which day any particular person or group chooses as their sabbath.

In the gospel, Mark relates a story of Jesus and the disciples breaking sabbath rules. As they traveled through the grainfields, the disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees, of course, complained to Jesus. "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" Jesus reminded them of an occasion when David, who was one of their big heroes, went into the temple and ate the bread of the presence which was supposedly sacred and only for the priests.

The parallel passage in Matthew (12:5) has Jesus say to them "Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless?" What he means is that the priests work on the sabbath, sacrificing, tending to the thermostat, preaching, etc. but are not guilty of breaking the sabbath -- only of doing their jobs.

But I'm not sure that Jesus was merely advocating the repeal of rules and regulations or that his main concern was with the specifics of laws and compliance with holiness codes. He continues, "The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath; the Human one is lord even of the sabbath." Jesus was not just out to reform the laws and make them more livable. Jesus was about the task of reorienting life on earth. Humankind no longer serves the day; the day was created for humankind.

Think about the extrapolation of that effort. We can see it in the early history of the church. For those first few centuries, the church effected an incredible social upheaval. Religion was no longer something people served; gods no longer required service and sacrifice. God became a giver for a few years there; people who were not acceptable were accepted. Those who had nothing became rich in community. Women and men, samaritans and jews, rich and poor -- became equal for those few startling years at the beginning of the church. Until the church became an entity that required service itself.

It's not what it seems. Well. It's kind of what it seems, but not really.

Mark goes on with his story. The Pharisees had certainly learned enough over the centuries to know that there were always exceptions to their rules. They were not a completely graceless group. But Jesus did not come to them asking for permission to break a rule once for a good cause. He didn't ask them at all. He didn't value their rules. At least not in the way they expected. He didn't advocate flaunting the rules and once on a whim said he came to uphold them, every jot and tittle. But he lived with an integrity that came from within and had no relation whatsoever to their rules. Jesus was a dangerous man to an institution so set on control. Being a Pharisee isn't so much an office, especially now. Being a Pharisee is a state of mind -- and we encounter Pharisees every day. And the jesuses through time have encountered the same result when the attempted to challenge the system.

"Jesus entered the synagogue, and a person was there who had a withered hand. And the Pharisees watched, to see whether Jesus would heal on the sabbath, so they could accuse him. And Jesus said to the one who had the withered hand, "Come here." And Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. Perhaps they had not expected a pop quiz. Jesus was pissed. He looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart. Jesus said to the person, "Stretch out your hand." The one with the withered hand stretched it out, and it was restored."

Pharisees can't get beyond the rules. Maybe that's not all bad. Rules play their role in our lives. Without them we'd live in chaos. The justices of the supreme court are pharisees in a classic understanding of the word. They interpret a document by which we have agreed to govern ourselves. The hebrew pharisees were doing no more. They were not merely intolerant bigots. But rules can suffocate. The rules say that it is wrong to work on the sabbath. The rules say that you must be proper and obey the government and fight to preserve peace and love only certain persons and behave in very particular ways. The Pharisees learn from childhood, we all learn from childhood that we are supposed to be "good little boys and girls". Don't rock the boat -- because if you do we might all fall into the swirling ocean beneath. Be pleasant and agreeable. Follow the rules. Restoring wholeness to someone's withered hand is less important than keeping the sabbath rules.

AND THE PHARISEES WENT OUT, AND IMMEDIATELY HELD COUNSEL WITH THE HERODIANS AGAINST JESUS, HOW TO DESTROY HIM.

"The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath." Jesus trekked around his time and place breaking rules right and left in his efforts to alleviate the suffering of people he met and to show them, and perhaps tell them, that God loved them. Jesus was clear in his priorities. So clear that he did not hesitate when asked to sum up the law. The law, he replied, is completed in love. If you love God with all that you are, and if you love your neighbor and yourself, then you will have completed the law. Completion; ending; cessation. SABBATH. Through Jesus, love has become the sabbath of law. Through love, we fulfill whatever obligations we have to rules and regulations. Love is primary to all the canons, edicts, precepts, customs, policies, even principles. Loving God. Loving your neighbor. Loving yourself. These are more important than following any rule.

But like martyrs before him and after him, his reorientation got him killed. Copernicus and Galileo advocated radical reorientation of the worldview of their known world. Martin Luther started a movement that was nearly as radical. Hus and Wycliffe radically departed from the accepted way of seeing things. Martin Luther King Jr. suggested a overturning of the way the world worked, the way it seemed it had always worked. Susan Anthony and Mary Wollstonecraft, among so many others, worked for a complete upheaval of the way men and women saw themselves and each other. Gay men and lesbians have been fighting to topple a worldview of them that has existed forever, or so it seems.

Creation is, or so it seems to me, only the imposition of meaning in a very thin veneer over an underlying chaos. That is to say, the only difference between anarchy and order is the rule of law. And the rule of law is very fragile and delicate. When someone comes along who starts

messing with the way you perceive creation and the way you administer the laws that maintain that creation, its easy to see why you'd object -- and object violently. Because even if you can recognize that the creation you rest on is not perfect, at least you know it and it keeps you from the swirling destruction of chaos just beneath the surface. People understandably perceive the advocated reorientation of people like Jesus -- or Jan Hus, or Martin Luther King, or Joan of Arc or Harvey Milk -- to be reorientations that might easily plunge us all into chaos; and they might.

But they might also raise us into paradise.

It's not what it seems. Well. It's kind of what it seems, but not really. But maybe it's not all that complicated afterall.

Keeping the Sabbath -- that is, reorienting your understanding of the world will not necessarily make your life easier or more comfortable. Changing your understanding of where you stand with relation to all other creation may not be easy. It killed Jesus. If you dare to keep the sabbath, the pharisees will fear you, hate you and plot against you. If you dare to love rather than obey, if you dare to go against the rules, to break taboos in the name of love and for the work of God -- the Pharisees will seek to destroy you. If you dare to confront preconceptions and prejudices with the love of God and the openness of the Holy Spirit, the Pharisees will make your life as difficult as they can and they will do whatever they can to stop you, including hounding you to death.

Keeping the sabbath holy -- will not necessarily make your life easier or more comfortable. It killed Jesus. ---- But I promise you that keeping the sabbath -- reorienting your life to love -- will make your life supremely meaningful.

Good Shabbot.

Amen.