Hannover International Worship
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Sermon on Mark 2:23-28
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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The sermon text from St Mark, the story of Jesus' disciples picking grains on a Sabbath, is one that I have a very special history with.
It happens to be the text that I wrote my very first New Testament paper on at university.

Why this story as a university paper? Well, obviously there was a limited choice of texts the professors would offer us.
But I was actually interested in the topic of Sabbath for personal reasons, so I was quite happy to take this text. The personal reasons being that part of my family belongs to the Seventh Day Adventist church which celebrates Saturday as their holy day instead of Sunday, as most Christians do.

So, from early on, I have been familiar with all the arguments and reasons for one day or the other. As you can easily tell, I have never found this a reason to change my own denomination, but, to tell the truth, I do somewhat see their point. The New Testament evidence for celebrating Sunday – "the Lord's day", as the resurrection day would be called –, is pretty faint. It was relatively late in the process of the early church going through the painful phase of conflicts and separation from the synagogue, that they started to shift from Saturday to Sunday.

In the gospels, there is no trace whatsoever of anyone ever celebrating Sunday as their holy day. For Jesus and his disciples, this never was a question. The Sabbath was their holy day, and that's that. It was so natural to them that the gospel writers hardly bothered to even mention it. We find slight hints in inconspicuous sentences like "The next day was a Sabbath, and Jesus went into the synagogue as was his habit". (So, just on a side note, if anyone ever happens to confront you with lame excuses for not going to church, like "The Bible doesn't tell of Jesus himself going to service", oh yes, it does. It's just that it does so in such an incidental way that nobody ever notices.)

But before I get too sidetracked: For our sermon text from St Mark's, there is no question about Sabbath or Sunday. It's not at all what this is about. It's about how to *interpret* the Sabbath commandment.

The Pharisees say, picking grains on a Sabbath is harvesting, it's work, which means it is not allowed. Jesus says it's not harvesting, it's only because they happen to be hungry. As evidence from scripture, he quotes the story of David in his early days, when David was not a king yet but more something like a guerilla fighter, asking for the holy bread that was intended only for the priests.

Centuries of Christian theologians all the way down to my own 20th century religious schoolbooks have turned this into a "Jesus against the others" kind of story. Jesus against the Pharisees, against those ridiculous nitpickers and notorious hypocrites, as they were looked at for centuries. Who would even come up with such an absurd idea that picking a few grains could be considered harvesting? Well, someone who would take God's gift of a free day seriously.

Let me ask you: When have you last had a day that was really totally free from work, no cooking, no housework, no tax documents, no leftover ironing meant to be done on Friday, no papers taken home from work, and on top of all that, not even a bad conscience about total leisure? That is how the Pharisees wanted to have God's gift taken seriously!

We do them injustice if we view them as nitpickers. And this is *not* a story of Jesus against the Pharisees, as it was long viewed.

Or, worse yet, of Jesus against the Jews. As if Jesus himself wasn't a Jew.

A theology that separates Jesus from Judaism, from his own being Jewish, is a dangerous theology. I will not go so far as to say that it was Christian theology that actually *caused* the death of millions of Jews in the 20th century. I will however go so far as to say that Christian antijudaism has certainly *paved the way* for 19th and 20th century antisemitism, and it has given a perverted theological justification to those atrocities. This is something to be very much aware of, especially in times like today, when extremist thoughts and ideas like those from back then are cropping up again and becoming stronger again in our own country as well as in others.

Now if it's not "Jesus against the Jews" or "Jesus against the Pharisees" in this story, what is it?

A famous Jewish scholar by the name of Pinchas Lapide studied Christianity from a Jewish point of view, and with his knowledge of the

Hebrew and Aramaic languages and of Jewish traditions, he discovered a lot of fascinating details in Jesus.
For instance, he looked at contemporary rabbis and their teachings. And guess what, they were constantly having discussions or even arguments about how to interpret the Sabbath laws. What is allowed on a Sabbath, what is not?
There were rabbis who were very strict in their interpretation, others were more liberal. It was a totally normal thing among Jewish scholars to have differing opinions and to argue about these things!
Jesus was doing exactly what every other good Jewish rabbi of his times would have been doing. As a matter of fact, what Jewish rabbis are doing to this very day.

Let me give you an example of this, again from my own family. Yes, my own family has become even more complicated since, having added some Jewish in-laws who live in Jerusalem, the very heart of Jewish life.

My parents-in-law planned their 50th wedding anniversary, and they scheduled it on a Saturday. The normal day for big celebrations here in Germany, which gives everyone a day to relax before returning to work. Now my brother-in-law who has converted to Judaism and has a Jewish wife and a Jewish family had a problem. What about the Sabbath? How was he to handle the Sabbath law, yet join his family for the celebration, and even attend a Christian church service?

So, he did what every good Jewish person would do: He went to his rabbi and asked him. And the rabbi did what every rabbi would have done back in the times of Jesus or today: He gave him his interpretation of the Sabbath law. Which, in this case, was: The commandment to

honor your parents in this case outweighs the Sabbath commandment. So, by all means, go and celebrate with your parents.

Just like that, the Pharisees and the Sadducees and all the different religious groups with their leaders would have had these discussions and arguments back in Jesus' times. It was a totally normal thing to do. It wasn't "Jesus against everybody else", it was simply everyone discussing with everybody.

In fact, some modern Christian scholars assume that Jesus may actually have been very close to the Pharisees, closer than to any other group of his time. Not a Pharisee himself, in all likelihood, but very close. Quite honestly, it makes sense to me, not *in spite* of all these arguments that are documented in the Bible, but rather *because* of them: Who do you argue more with, a distant cousin you meet once a year, or a brother or sister you live with every day? The closer you are with someone, the more occasion you have for arguments or even for conflict. It makes total sense to me that Jesus probably was very close to the Pharisees.

Now that we have established that this whole story is not a "Jesus against the Pharisees", or worse, "Jesus against the Jews" kind of story, but a "Jesus discussing matters like every other Jewish leader would do" kind of story, I will have to throw some cold water on the whole thing. It's the last sentence of this story. Jesus claiming that he is the Lord over the Sabbath.

Now that is clearly a messianic claim Jesus makes for himself.
No Jewish leader of his time or of modern times would have done that, except for a few nutcases who believed themselves to be the messiah –

yes, there have been a number of those over the centuries, most of them never gathering a relevant number of followers, never taken seriously by anyone, and totally forgotten by now.

Jesus does make this messianic claim here. Now modern Christian theologians have been discussing if this was a quote from Jesus that has been added on to this story at a later point in time, but quite frankly, what's the difference.

This messianic claim would in fact put the other Jewish leaders on the alert. They would immediately know that here someone is going beyond the scope of the normal Jewish argument.

The author of this gospel did not, however, write this sentence down in order to reflect on the reactions of the other Jewish leaders.
He writes this for the readers of his gospel. For the readers back then, and for us today.
This sentence is, first and foremost, a confession: "Jesus is the Lord".
The readers of the gospel of St Mark believe that Jesus is the Jewish messiah that has been prophesied over the centuries.

Everything else simply follows from that. The Messiah is Lord over everything, so he must also be Lord over the Sabbath.
So, what does Jesus as the Messiah do? Does he declare the Sabbath to be obsolete, outdated, canceled? Far from it. Again and again, Jesus emphasized that he has not come to abolish the commandments but to confirm and to fulfill them.

So, does that mean we should all join the Seventh Day Adventist church and switch to celebrating the Sabbath?

I don't believe that that's the point. The point is of giving the Sabbath the purpose and the meaning God intended for it to have. God intended one day of rest per week, one day that is dedicated for worship and for total freedom from work.
What a luxury, come to think of it! None of the other peoples around ancient Israel had a comparable day off every seven days. Nowhere else did the servants, the work animals, even the slaves, get a day off.

And where in our modern world do we find this luxury?
To this day, constantly attempts are being made at undermining this privilege. Employers expect their employees to read and reply to e-mails at all times, including on the weekend and during their vacation. Decent normal families, even Christian families, expect Polish caretakers to be available for their elderly family member 24/7, without so much as a day off per week.

We may discuss with Jesus and with others about how to interpret this day, like if it's really necessary to buy fresh rolls on a Sunday morning or even go shopping on a Sunday, making more and more salespersons have to work on Sundays. We can discuss if children really need to leave their homework until Sunday, or if mom or dad really has to do extensive cooking and cleaning up on this day.

But first and foremost, this is about praising God for giving us this incredible day. as a day of worship and rest. This one day per week, an incredible gift from God, a gift that cannot be valued high enough. Amen.