

# In the center, or: Why you are important to God

Sermon on the 9th Sunday of the year (B)

*Mark 2:23–3:6*

## **Gospel of the Sunday**

*<sup>23</sup>As he was passing through a field of grain on the sabbath, his disciples began to make a path while picking the heads of grain. <sup>24</sup>At this the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the sabbath?" <sup>25</sup>He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions were hungry? <sup>26</sup>How he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of offering that only the priests could lawfully eat, and shared it with his companions?" <sup>27</sup>Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath. <sup>28</sup>That is why the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."*

*<sup>1</sup>Again he entered the synagogue. There was a man there who had a withered hand. <sup>2</sup>They watched him closely to see if he would cure him on the sabbath so that they might accuse him. <sup>3</sup>He said to the man with the withered hand, "Come up here before us." <sup>4</sup>Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?" But they remained silent. <sup>5</sup>Looking around at them with anger and grieved at their hardness of heart, he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out and his hand was restored. <sup>6</sup>The Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him to put him to death.*

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What is at the center of your faith? If I asked you - when you leave later - at the church door: What would you answer? The most important thing about your faith - what is at the center?

Dear brothers and sisters, we would perhaps answer - that we have a relationship with God and live our faith according to certain rules. One of the rules might lead us here week after week. Here, where we celebrate worship together on Sundays. And indeed, attending Sunday service is often used as a sign of how vital faith is. Those who come - like us today, you and I - we are perhaps categorized as active Christians - the good Catholics who come regularly on Sundays.

To say it right at the beginning and so as not to be misunderstood. The fact that Christians celebrate church services together on a Sunday is an uncanny value. And Christians have gathered together from the very beginning to hear the words of Scripture and break bread. From the beginning, they lived from the specialness, the sanctification of Sunday as the seventh day of the week. But, and we must be aware of this, this is not the center of our faith. At least the Gospel today tells us about a different center.

The Gospel of Mark has a passage for us today that deals with the significance of the seventh day: the Sabbath. The Gospel of Mark tells us about it today in two episodes:

One is about the Pharisees' complaint to Jesus that his disciples had plucked ears of corn - the Pharisees considered this to be work and a breach of the custom of keeping the Sabbath holy. Jesus rules with biblical firmness and reminds the Pharisees of a story about King David and how he satisfied his hunger with cult bread. And then comes this weighty sentence:

*The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.* Mark 2:27

Keeping the Sabbath holy should be good for people, the day of rest is there to give people a quality of life. Jesus reminds the Pharisees of this and makes it clear - this is not about keeping the rules, but about whether what you do is good for people. And at this point you may ask yourself: can you say for yourself - for yourself: "It is good that I am here." "It's good that I can rest here." I very much hope that you can leave this hour with this feeling. Perhaps this is the first statement we

take away from the Gospel: I should come to church on Sundays, not because I have to, but because it is good for me.

And then there is this second episode, which is again about the Sabbath and really puts this Sabbath into perspective in Jesus' mind. Again, it is a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees - they look closely at how this Jesus behaves in the synagogue during the service. At that time there was a man - actually the original says "human" - so at that time there was a man in the service who had a withered hand. How can we imagine a withered hand? Something is withered when there is no water to sustain it. This hand had obviously become unfit for life, a part of this person had become unfit for life. What has become unviable for us? What in us, in you and me, has perhaps withered, dried up? How did you get here today? At this moment, Jesus is not at all indifferent to this person, he does not ignore it, on the contrary:

*Come up here before us. Mark 3:3*

Jesus brings the man into the center with his withered hand. He brings the person with his suffering into the center. So this person with his lack of quality of life is at the center. You are at the center for Jesus, with all the dryness you have brought with you. And Jesus places this in the right relationship:

*Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it? Mark 3:4*

Doing good, saving lives - "saving the psyche" is what it says in Greek - that's what Jesus is all about, and that's what we should be all about on Sunday. That you and all the people among us who are struggling with life can come here and receive the attention they need.

This was important to Jesus, because he gets "angry and sad" about the fact that the Pharisees are probably immune to this with their "hardness of heart". The person standing in the middle with his withered hand should stretch out his hand. And it will regain its vitality.

This is how it should be for us, for you and me: that you can go home healed. Because he has placed you in the center and because the others, all of us, are not sitting next to each other with indifference.

Dear brothers and sisters, I would like to make a suggestion: perhaps, when there is some silence and time later in the service, you could think about what you would like to lay down for Jesus from your life. What of your life you want him to place in the center?

And another thing: perhaps you also have the courage and the inner openness to listen to your sister or brother next to you. Place each other at the center of your attention! Perhaps it is precisely this kind of attention, this kind of brotherhood, that is at the center of our faith. At least it seems to be something that Jesus teaches us.

By Deacon Thomas

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