

“A False Choice”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Luke 6:1-16

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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

The first thing we need to know about this pair of sabbath controversy stories is that the Pharisees are being faithful and good-intentioned and they have a point. Those Pharisees have gotten the short end of the historical stick from the Church ever since the Temple in Jerusalem fell in the year 70. When the Temple fell, organized Judaism was sent into disarray, and the Christians and the Pharisees were in direct competition to be heirs to Israel's story.

So the Pharisees get to be the bad guys in the Gospels. They're wearing black hats. They're the heartless Borg. They're the Disney villain with the British accent. They show up as foils for Jesus, representing all of the Jewish leaders, while it was the high priests who would ultimately be the core conspirators against him. In fact, Pharisees were kind of the progressive-ish, mainline Protestants of first century Judaism. They were democratizing religious experience while other sects insisted on the priesthood and the temple as mediators between the people and their God.

Their concern about the sabbath was legitimate. Israel had, in its recent history, been oppressed by the Seleucid Empire, which made it illegal to read the Torah and to keep the sabbath. And now Israel was under the thumb of Rome. And the formative story of Jews then as today is a story of people freed by their God from bondage in Egypt, where they had no rest. It's hard for us to understand just how important questions of sabbath practice would have been. But while we're at it, we might as well remember that this wasn't an interfaith dialogue — this was a debate between Jewish Pharisees and a Jewish rabbi named Jesus.

In both of these encounters — the grain field and the withered hand in the synagogue — Jesus and his disciples are breaking sabbath rules. And in both encounters, the Pharisees see what he has done and are beside themselves. In the first story it's kind of funny to imagine the Pharisees keeping an eye on the grain field to see if anyone eats from it. But then in the second story, Jesus clearly knows what's up, and provokes them by healing the man's hand. Jesus obviously isn't ignorant of the rules, and he's definitely a Jew who takes the Torah seriously.

I think what's going on here is a disagreement about the very nature of God's law. Those faithful Pharisees see the commandment to keep the sabbath as a rule about our relationship to God. And of course it is. There are laws that are about how we relate to God. And there are rules about how we relate to each other. This sabbath thing is one of those “God rules,” and Jesus is thumbing his nose at it. And so Jesus is thumbing his nose at God.

Jesus protests in the grain field that David did it when he was hungry - in fact, David took the special holy bread and ate it — so why shouldn't they? Oh man, did this guy just compare himself to David? But wait, there's more. He tells them, “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.” When this story appears in the gospel of Mark, Jesus adds, helpfully, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind

for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27) Later, standing with the man with the withered hand, Jesus says to the Pharisees, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?”

In the way I have come to understand this debate, Jesus does a classic Jesus thing: he makes a new way. He will not choose between the laws that are about relating to God and the ones that command that we care for one another. If there is hunger, we do not choose between God and humanity. That is a false choice. To choose humanity is to choose God. If there is healing to be done, we do not choose between pleasing God and helping one in need. That is a false choice. To help one in need is to please God. God’s commandments are not meant to shut us off from one another, but to free us to one another. Pharisees, you’ve got it all wrong. God did not give us the sabbath to constrain us. God gave us the sabbath as a gift. And so to stifle an expression of divine love in the name of the sabbath is to turn that gift into something that is not life-giving. Sabbath is good and holy and essential. But love trumps sabbath. The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath, not the other way around. The sabbath serves the people of God. The sabbath was made for the people, not the people for the sabbath.

Jesus has refused a false choice between God and neighbor. Instead, he brings healing. He brings hope. He brings disruption. He brings resistance. And he does all this within the context of his Jewish faith. He came not to abolish the law, remember, but to fulfill it. (Matthew 5:17) He connects it to David. He steps into the long-running debates among Jewish leaders about sabbath practice. His stance: there is no choosing between God and neighbor.

As we know well, the world does not appreciate it when you refuse to choose between the given options. It got Jesus killed. And, ever since, it’s been turning the screws awfully hard on anyone who’s had the gall to call out such false choices — whether in the Church or in the larger world.

Here’s an example we know well: worldwide Christianity has demanded that there is a choice between being a faithful Christian and affirming that LGBTQ+ people are beloved children of God. This congregation, followed by our denomination, has declared that to be a false choice. It is not either or, and in fact, faithfulness to Christ and the celebration of the diversity of sexual expression go hand in hand. If not loving God’s children is presented as an option, you can be pretty sure you’ve found yourself a false choice.

You don’t have to look far. We are being told currently that there are two options: “America First,” or choosing to be a less than great nation. We can quibble with which “America” is being put first. And we can respond that a greatness that sees all humanity as equal is the greatest greatness. It’s such unbelievable greatness. It’s tremendous greatness. It’s the greatness that remembers that the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. (Luke 13:30) When the people of God hear “it’s us or them,” it is clear we’ve been presented with a false choice.

Here are two more options: choose to believe in science, or to believe in God. We are told to choose between evolution and scripture. We are told that we can be in favor of business, or in favor of caring for the environment. False choices all around.

We have been presented with the choice between security and providing refuge for those who have no place to go. Yet again, a false choice. Every single day of high school, I rode the Staten Island Ferry past the Statue of Liberty. Watching the news this week, I imagine the statue prying the Emma Lazarus poem from inside her pedestal and reading,

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

and then throwing it like a frisbee in the general direction of Canada and then putting down her tablet and her torch, kicking the broken chain at her feet into the harbor, and shrugging her shoulders, saying "I just can't decide if your particular yearning to breathe free is worth the risk." Of course, we know what scripture commands we do with refugees. There is no choice.

What we have heard from Washington this week is that there are two choices: compliance and.. Well, no, there's just compliance. The other option would be complexity, but if endangered species are still a thing at the end of this month, it would appear complexity will make the list. Concern for the global impact of our nation's actions is not an option. Concern for the the dignity, safety, or very humanity of anyone who does not look like, well, me, is for losers, now. Concern for clarity on facts has become passé. There is only one choice, and it is compliance.

I, for one, would never put the American empire on par with Christ. But to draw a parallel, the United States was made for its people, not its people for the United States. We the people are what make up this country, and we have the power to call out false choices when they are presented to us. For your information: a protest for refugees and immigrants will take place this afternoon at 2 p.m. at Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport.

As Christians, we must never choose between loving God and loving our neighbors. It is a false choice. When we see suffering, we have been taught by our savior to despise questions about the worthiness, the social status, the religion, or the ethnicity of the one in need. These are questions that take us away not just from loving our neighbor, but from loving our God.

We have been taught by our savior not to choose between us and them, thus building a wall between — literally or figuratively — between children of God. We have been taught to invite everyone to dinner instead. We have been taught by our savior not to wave a flag until we have been willing to carry a cross.

And we have been taught to never let anyone make us choose between pleasing God and caring for those that society pushes to the margins. For that is a false choice if the God we seek is neither wealth nor power nor our own ego, but instead the God of liberation and love and peace and resurrection. The God we meet in the man crushing grain and healing on the sabbath. This is a God foolish enough to refuse to choose between us and heaven, but who instead demands that the two coexist in divine complexity. Thanks be to God. Amen.