

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, JUNE 3, 2018

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

Time is like a river. You cannot touch the water twice, because the flow that has passed will never pass again. Enjoy every moment of life. This thought came to me as I ran across a story about a musician who answered a very unique call. He writes "As a bagpiper, I play many gigs. Recently I was asked by a funeral director to play at a graveside service for a homeless man. He had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the Saskatchewan back country.

As I was not familiar with the backwoods, I got lost and, being a typical man, I didn't stop for directions.

I finally arrived an hour late and saw the funeral guy had evidently gone and the hearse was nowhere in sight. There were only the diggers and crew left and they were eating lunch.

I felt badly and apologized to the men for being late. I went to the side of the grave and looked down and the vault lid was already in place. I didn't know what else to do, so I started to play.

The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. I played out my heart and soul for this man with no family and friends. I played like I've never played before for this homeless man.

And as I played 'Amazing Grace,' the workers began to weep. They wept, I wept, we all wept together.

When I finished I packed up my bagpipes and started for my car. Though my head hung low, my heart was full.

As I opened the door to my car, I heard one of the workers say, "I never seen nothin' like that before and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years."ⁱ

'Apparently, I'm still lost' he says....it's a man thing."

I've felt kind of lost myself having been away from the pulpit for three weeks now; one starts to lose the rhythm of speaking and storytelling with each week that goes by. I missed sharing with you two of the major feast days of the church: Pentecost and Trinity Sunday; so I hope you're up to date on where we are on our journey through 2018. Now we begin that long period of 26 weeks or so that takes us to Advent, and we leave behind us the agendas of the gospels of Lent and Easter, settling in to Jesus' life before any of his resurrection life was a reality. Once again we are back to the *Gospel of Mark*, having left *John* and his concerns about Jesus as the Christ. Now we find ourselves wandering amidst the healing stories of Jesus, beginning with healing

the man who had a withered hand on the Sabbath and why it should not, and could not have waited another day.

The day begins well and upbeat. Jesus and his followers are walking through a field of grain, and absentmindedly pick some of the seeds, not because they are hungry but just because it was a pleasurable thing to do. The self-appointed religious policemen, those ever-so-righteous Pharisees, are nearby and are quick to note that the disciples have done something illegal, i.e., “working” on the Sabbath by having pressed the grain between their fingers, the first steps in making bread. I can just see Jesus now, saying to them and all assembled, “you’ve got to be kidding! Is that the best you can do? That’s just nitpicking at its worst!” And he goes on to give them a tutorial on the fourth commandment about what keeping the Sabbath holy means. It reminds me of a time in the second congregation I served. I was president of the Coalition for the Homeless in Westchester County at the time, and our church was one of 30 religious organizations that took turns housing the homeless on a monthly basis. The powers to be would not allow homeless men, women, or children to stay more than one night in any one church or synagogue, since more than one night would constitute permanent housing, which was illegal absent hotel-like conditions, such as fire escapes, smoke alarms, food permits, etc. It was Christmas Eve, and our turn to house, which meant that there would be sleeping bags in the parish hall and cots and food brought in, and smells, perhaps some pleasant, others not. The homeless were to sleep in the parish hall, away from the church itself. One of the officers of the congregation came in and surveyed the situation, and then said to me, “Do we have to have these people here on Christmas Eve when we should be displaying the best that we have and do? Really, it makes us seem so ragtag!” I was taken aback. I said to the gentleman, “Ed, what part of the Christmas story do you not understand? Have you ever heard, ‘no room at the inn?’” He was obviously more concerned with how things might look to others or to visitors than keeping in mind the healing ministry we were focused on through our outreach. The housing regulations and the opinions of others would just have to wait for some other day. That day, Christmas Eve, was the day for healing, and nothing in my mind was going to stop that. I stood up to the decision that had been made, just as Jesus stands up to the choices he made about what is allowable on the Sabbath in telling the story about David’s men eating the bread of the Presence. That’s the thing about laws; they are meant to be interpreted, which is why we have a whole system of lawyers and judges and legal experts to help us figure our way through what are often very muddy waters. Jesus sets himself up as the arbitrator in this story, and that’s where his troubles with the religious authorities begin. Mark tells us that from this point forward, the Pharisees and the Herodians (those loyal to Herod) looked for ways to kill him. This is very early on in the gospel - - chapter 2. Jesus still has more than 2 1/2 years to go until they catch up to him, so we see how much ground we have to cover in the next 25 weeks!

The second half of the gospel reading comments on what takes place when Jesus enters the synagogue, raising the stakes by being on holy ground. There he encounters a man who has a withered hand. Jesus has to make a decision about healing and whether it is allowable on the Sabbath - - his Good Samaritan moment - - only on a much smaller scale. The key question that Jesus asks is "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" "The silence of the Pharisees in the face of this question serves as a confirmation that the Sabbath is honored by doing good, by saving life.

The writers at the well-known Theology of Work project challenge us when reading this text by asking "How does this apply to our work today? First of all, Sabbath law is not designed to burden us, but to provide an opportunity for rest, a rest that prefigures the coming day of God's eternal rest. The Sabbath principle is that we must consecrate a portion of our time and keep it free from the demands of work, allowing it to take on a distinctive character of worship. This is not to say that the Sabbath is the only time of worship, nor that work cannot be a form of worship itself. But the Sabbath principle allows us time to focus on God in a different way than the working week allows, and to enjoy God's blessing in a distinctive way. Crucially, too, it gives us space to allow our worship of God to manifest itself in social compassion, care, and love. Our worship on the Sabbath flavors our work during the week.ⁱⁱ We probably don't think much about Sabbath-keeping; as Disciples of Christ, it's not something that is front and center as a priority. Should we be better at Sabbath keeping? That reminds me of a second humorous Sabbath story for the morning.

Moe and Lenny are strolling home from shul one Saturday morning. Suddenly a cab speeds past, and their friend, Irving, is running frantically behind it, flailing his arms wildly.

"Well," said Lenny, "I never imagined our good friend Irving was a Sabbath violator! Look at him running for that taxi."

"Wait a minute," Moe replied. "Didn't you read that book I lent you, 'The Other Side of the Story', about the command to judge other people favorably? I'll bet we can think of hundreds of excuses for Irving's behavior."

"Yeah, like what?"

"Maybe he's sick and needs to go to the hospital."

"Come on! He was running 60 miles an hour after that cab - he's healthier than Arnold Schwarzenweis."

"Well, maybe his wife's having a baby."

"She had one last week."

"Well, maybe he needs to visit her in the hospital."

"She's home."

"Well, maybe he's running to the hospital to get a doctor."

"He *is* a doctor."

"Well, maybe he needs supplies from the hospital."

"The hospital is a three- minute walk in the opposite direction."

"Well, maybe he forgot that it's Shabbos!"

"Of course he knows it's Shabbos. Didn't you see his tie? It was his paisley beige 100% silk Giovanni tie from Italy. He never wears it during the week."

"Wow, you're really observant! I didn't even notice he was wearing a tie."

"How could you not notice? It's caught in the back fender of that taxi?"ⁱⁱⁱ

So today's gospel is more about right priorities, more than anything else. I learned that teaching this to others or leading them to your way of thinking is harder to do than one might imagine. During my stated tenure as President of the Coalition for the Homeless of Westchester I ran afoul of government procedures on more than one occasion. As I said earlier, the county government would not allow houses of worship to shelter the homeless because we did not meet certain meeting space limits and health restrictions; it was okay for someone to freeze to death on our front steps than to open the door to them. There were heavy fines for doing so - - \$1000 per person per night, and most religious groups were scared into kowtowing to the laws and restrictions in place. Finally, much to our regret, we did have a homeless person freeze to death during a snowstorm, and the public outcry made the County move into action. The legislature passed a law that said that the County must present overnight housing to anyone who requests it, and though it did not matter where, it must be done. So, every hotel room was full in the county from then on. The County spent more than \$39 million placing people in temporary housing rather than build housing, because of the NIMBYism - - not in my back yard, you don't - - of what was then the richest county in the nation. Then came the fight over food stamps. The County was directed to feed our poor homeless friends, so they decided to do so with food stamps. The only problem was they insisted that they had to be mailed to a known address to keep down on the levels of fraud they were sure would arise. And guess what? Homeless people don't have a permanent address, so unless they could rent a post office box somewhere they were not eligible for SNAP, the food program. I and my friends at the ACLU took the county to court and won that battle; food stamps could be picked up at any county housing office from then on. The next touse came about what you needed to pick up your food stamps. The County, in their wisdom, decided that only two kinds of i.d.s were acceptable - only a driver's license or a U.S. passport (lest any foreigners get caught eating food meant for our kids) was acceptable. Well then, it was back to the court with the aid of the ACLU. The judge was so angry she made a ruling that any kind of i.d. was acceptable, including a library card, a denial letter from food stamps, or even a letter from someone who knew you and would vouch for you and say you are who you say you are.

The war was relentless, and as you are aware in so many other ways regarding documentation, it still continues. What, I ask you, my brothers and sisters, does the Lamb of God, think about this kind of harassment? Our Sabbaths would be better spent in advocacy or prayers for those who have less than we do while thanking God for our many blessings. For in the end, we are told, it is God who will judge the righteous, and there will be a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth for what could have been and is not. Let us make sure we are doing our part to bring about the beloved community of God, no matter how small the commitment. That is why we congregate on this Sabbath - - for when two or more are gathered in God's name, God will be in our midst, and will lead us by the word and example of Jesus and those who call upon *His* name to do good works and strengthen our faith. May saying yes to Christ daily for his example allow us to move forward in the glory of God's name through the work of the Holy Spirit. And may our hands, withered or no, be the agents of our work. **Working hands, strong heart, living church!**

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner Wilson Hesse, Jr.

Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ <https://www.thespoof.com/jokes/12164/graveside-bagpipe-player-gets-lost>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/mark/rhythms-of-work-rest-and-worship/the-lord-of-the-sabbath-mark-223-36>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.jokebuddha.com/Sabbath#ixzz5GuIQIwgt>