

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Rediscover Jesus: House of Cards”

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Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

Mark 2:18-28

Today we wrap up our series “Rediscover Jesus,” so before we get into our text for today, let me share a preview of what to expect over the next couple of weeks. Next Sunday we’ll celebrate World Communion Sunday and the global scope of Christ’s church, welcoming Rev. Marilyn Borst from the Outreach Foundation as our guest preacher. The week after that, we’ll begin a new series, kind of a “Part 2” to this one that we’re calling “Rediscover Church.” It’ll be a walk through some of the early chapters of the Book of Acts, asking how did those early Christians share life and ministry together? How does the church then speak to our church now? That’ll start in two weeks.

Today, we’ll go to the end of chapter two in the Gospel of Mark. These early chapters, though not covering *all* of Jesus’ public ministry in Galilee, give us a snapshot of what Jesus was teaching and doing, what he was showing about who he is and what it means to follow him. And today as we wrap up, Jesus gets into it with some of the religious authorities of the day and in so doing reminds us in the most selfless way possible that it’s all about him. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

In 1915, a German physicist named Albert Einstein presented before the Prussian Academy of the Sciences in Berlin one of the most revolutionary scientific papers ever offered. When it comes to science papers, “revolutionary” is not a word often used, but if correct, the paper’s conclusions had the potential to change how

we understand the universe. You see, for centuries, really ever since Isaac Newton, much of scientific and mathematical theory had operated under the assumption that Newton's equations for classical mechanics were correct. But what Einstein offered said that it just wasn't quite that simple, and that's especially true when you're talking about things that either are really big or are moving really fast.

What he offered became known as the theory of general relativity, the idea that time and light behave differently when closer to or farther away from something really, really big like a planet or a star, because of gravity. Kind of blew the lid off the joint. The idea that a minute here would not necessarily be the same minute if you were closer to the sun or a black hole or whatever, it was revolutionary at the time. But Einstein had come prepared. He had research and equations to prove his theory. Opened the door to entire new fields of observation of space, all to test whether the theories of this German scientist might actually be true.

Just a few years later, a British scientist named Arthur Stanley Eddington, while documenting a solar eclipse from two points on the earth, observed and measured how light was actually bending around the sun, in part confirming that the theories of this crazy-haired scientist were in fact viable. This led to more tests, more theories, more examination, more evidence, etc., until a couple of years later Einstein was given the Noble Prize for Physics.

Now consider everything that Einstein prepared, all the time in research and thought, pouring over equations, drafting and editing and re-editing his papers, and then imagine if he had simply stepped in front of the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1915 and said, "Reality is not entirely how you thought it was. Why? Because of me." How well would that have gone over?

He would've been laughed out of the place. You can't say that to a room full of scientists and be taken seriously. Just doesn't work that way.

I'd like you to think about that, to imagine that, to consider just how absurd it would be for Albert Einstein to stand up and say that, and then consider that that was about what Jesus was saying in these exchanges that we read a moment ago.

We pick up in Mark's Gospel where we left off last week. Jesus is continuing his teaching ministry in Galilee, and we see two exchanges, both concerning the some of the day's religious authorities at the time known as the Pharisees. Quick word about who the Pharisees were, because if you've ever heard of them or if you're half-familiar with them, sometimes we can paint them with a very broad brush, usually making them look like a bunch of stodgy curmudgeons who don't like change. That's not exactly true. The Pharisees were in fact a reform movement within Judaism that sought to recenter on the law, which they thought the Jewish people had gotten away from. They were often very passionate about it. So when you hear Pharisees, maybe don't think of stuck-in-the-mud rule followers. Maybe think more of passionate, if overzealous reformers, calling the Jews back to the Word of God.

Two exchanges with Jesus concerning these Pharisees, one that is just *about* them, the other that is actually with them. At one point, the question comes up about how those who follow him, how his disciples should put their faith into practice.

For some reason, people of faith at the time were fasting. Mark doesn't tell us why. There's only one day in the Jewish law that calls for a fast, but more likely it was a special time of fasting that was called in response to a local or regional crisis. For whatever the reason, folks noticed that Jesus' disciples were not. So they wonder, what gives? That's a fair question. It'd be like if you knew of a church that didn't celebrate Christmas. There's

no biblical requirement that all faithful Christians must celebrate Jesus' birth on December 25. But if every other church had their Christmas Eve services, and only one church didn't, might make folks wonder, "Why don't you celebrate Christmas?" Not necessarily wrong. It's just kind of curious.

So Jesus responds, and his answer is even weirder. "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day." And that's true. A fast is supposed to signify a time of repentance or mourning, denying yourself food for a dedicated period of time in order to focus your attention upon God. So who in their right mind goes into a wedding thinking, "You know, I need to get right with God. This would be a good time to mourn"? Well, maybe some grooms think that way. (Kidding.) Point is, a wedding is a joyful celebration. You don't go to a wedding to fast.

That much is straightforward, but what's weird is that Jesus is claiming that this time happening right now is essentially a wedding, a time set apart for celebration. He doesn't say the practice of fasting is wrong. It's just not something they would do right then. Why? Because the bridegroom is with them, right now. He's saying that practice of fasting doesn't apply because the bridegroom is with them right now. And who, he implies, is the bridegroom in this situation? He is. They don't fast because of who he is.

The second exchange, happening on shortly after, has to do with the sabbath day. He and his disciples are walking through a grainfield, and some of his disciples pluck a few heads of grain along the way for a snack. Some Pharisees either see it or hear about it and confront Jesus about it, saying "Why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And again, that's a fair point. A bit nit-picky—I mentioned that the Pharisees could be a bit overzealous—but a fair point. The sabbath was supposed to be a day of rest, on which no work was done. You're supposed to make preparations the day before, so that on the sabbath itself you wouldn't need to do any work. And plucking heads of grain, on a very small scale, could be considered to be the work of the harvest. Why are they doing that? Why didn't Jesus and his disciples make better preparations? Why are they doing what isn't lawful?

And honestly I think Jesus' would have been on solid ground if he had said something like, "Are you serious? There's a big difference between picking fruit off a branch to eat and plucking the entire tree. Going a bit overboard." He could have left it there. Could have appealed to reason and reasonability. But he doesn't.

Instead he invokes an episode from the Book of Samuel, in which David, a young man—same David who had killed the giant Goliath as a boy—who has been anointed king but hasn't been recognized as king and therefore is on the run from the current king, flees into the house of God with his men. In that sacred space, there was some sacred bread that only priests were allowed to eat. But they were starving, so the priest gave them some. The point could be, don't stand on ceremony when people are starving. But there's also the whole David-is-the-anointed-king part of it too, which begs the question, who's the king now in this situation?

He concludes his remarks by saying, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath"—another powerful point; we shouldn't put the cart before the horse; don't let religious practice drive its own bus—but then in case there was any confusion, he adds, "so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

In both of those exchanges, the first about fasting, the second about the sabbath, Jesus doesn't respond with a reasoned proof from Scripture, going point by point to justify why the practice of fasting isn't necessary at the point in time or why plucking heads of grain on the sabbath didn't count as work. Instead he says, these don't apply because of who I am. He is the bridegroom that the wedding guests are celebrating. He is the anointed-but-

not-yet-recognized king, like David, whose men are hungry in the house of God. He, as the Son of Man, is lord even of the sabbath.

It's taken us a while to get to this point, but it's an important one. Jesus isn't offering a radical new teaching, a "new piece of cloth" or "new wine in a new wineskin," so to speak, based on some scientific proof or mathematical equations or measurements taken during a solar eclipse. He's offering a radical new teaching based on one thing: that he is who he says he is.

I remember years ago grabbing coffee with a friend from college who was in town so we caught up. A sharp guy who had a healthy skepticism about organized religion, and somehow in the conversation he mentioned how he respected Jesus as a moral or ethical teacher, but didn't buy the whole eternal Son of God thing. Now I share my response to him not to say, "Oh look how clever I was," but because what my friend thought is a pretty common thing: respecting Jesus as a moral teacher, but not on board with the divinity stuff. I dare say everyone here knows someone in that boat. Heck, I bet there are some of us here who have those doubts sometimes.

I invited him to get a Bible, maybe even one of those red-letter Bibles in which all the words of Jesus are printed in red ink, and to look at what the Bible records Jesus as saying. Not anything else, just what Jesus said. And then after reading everything that Jesus said, could he come back and say that Jesus was a good, moral teacher? I already knew the answer. If you go just to things like, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you," you can come away thinking, "What a profound moral teacher Jesus was!" But you come to a passage like this one, in which Jesus offers a radical new teaching, and the only justification he gives is that he is who he says he is, you come to a passage like that, and it's harder to say that's good moral teaching. Because if he isn't who he says he is, if he isn't this bridegroom that the wedding guests are celebrating, if he isn't the anointed King, if he isn't the Son of Man lord of the sabbath, then the level of delusion it would require to say those things wouldn't exactly make for a good moral teacher, would it?

I have no idea whether my friend actually took on that exercise, so that might not have been the best example of evangelism or apologetics on my part. But Jesus puts that same question before all of us. This whole series we've been talking about "rediscovering" Jesus, and along the way, maybe we look to Jesus for powerful moral teaching, or for a calling to a more faithful life, or even for healing, and those are good things. But all of that comes crumbling down like a house of cards if one piece is missing: that Jesus actually is who he says is.

But if it's true, there's good news here.

Over the past few weeks, we've talked about whether we could be a friend to someone who's hurting, how we might feel called even if unqualified, how we might be an agent of healing, how we might take more time apart to pray with the Lord. All those things have come up as we've talked about "rediscovering" Jesus. And toward the end of it you might be thinking, "Well, I guess those are all the things I need to add to my list, things that I should do but ultimately won't be able to." Friends, if that's what you've taken away from any of the weeks in this series, I invite you not just to enter into another world of spiritual exhaustion. That was the world of the Pharisees, of trying to follow every rule as a path to piety. And if that's what you've heard coming from Jesus these past seven weeks, I invite you to hear what he is saying today: that there is joy and rest to be had in him, not solely because of what he is teaching but because he is who he says he is.

And that life in the kingdom of God, that life of new wine in new wineskins could be the life that you have in him.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.