

WHEN VALUES COLLIDE

Luke 6:1-11

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UMCG

My first experience with “keeping the Sabbath holy” occurred at the boarding school I attended in W. Africa. I was six years old. There were very strict rules about Sunday. Dress clothes were to be worn all day. Black slacks. White shirt and tie. Dress shoes. Worship services in the morning and evening. And definitely NO PLAYING—whatsoever! Not even running! Break the Sabbath rules and you were in big trouble. Like my friend who was caught playing near a mud puddle on the playground. Upon spotting him, the dorm mother yelled his name, ordered him inside the dorm, and immediately administered a whipping!

“One Sabbath day Jesus was going through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands to eat the kernels.” The Pharisees—observers par excellence—took notice and expressed their deep disapproval to Jesus...”On another Sabbath Jesus went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled.” (The Pharisees and teachers of the law keenly looked on.) “Knowing what they were thinking, Jesus said to the man, ‘Get up and stand in front of everyone.’ So he did. Then Jesus asked, ‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath—to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?’ Jesus looked at them all, then said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And when he did, his hand was completely healed. And the Pharisees and teachers of the law were furious, and began to plot against Jesus.” (From Luke 6:1-11)

Observing the Sabbath! Important stuff, eh! Robert Tannehill, in his commentary on Luke, tells us that refraining from work on the Sabbath was, and is, a very important part of the Mosaic Law—the 10 Commandments—and Jewish practice.⁽¹⁾ In fact, Numbers 15:32-36 demands stoning to death for any man who breaks this commandment. (I guess we got off easy at boarding school.)

This commandment is directly related to the creation account in Genesis 2. God rested on the 7th day and made it holy. God’s people are to do likewise. It is a day of rest. Biblical scholar Elizabeth Johnson points out that in Deuteronomy, the Sabbath commandment is connected to the Hebrews’ experience of slavery in Egypt.⁽²⁾ Pharaoh relentlessly demanded that as slaves, they should work every day. Free people can have a day off! Slaves can’t. Thus, every Sabbath day Jews not only follow God’s example of resting one day a week, but are reminded that God delivered them from slavery.

I don’t know. Maybe there’s a lesson in here somewhere for us today. As Elizabeth Johnson puts it, “One could argue that we have gone to the opposite extreme of the Pharisees. There seem to be no restrictions on what we can do on our Sabbath, Sunday. Our kids have soccer and baseball and multiple other activities on Sunday. The stores are open and we can shop til we drop. Or we can catch up on chores and projects around the house. And worship? That becomes one more thing to squeeze in to a busy day...Instead of feeling rested and renewed, we begin another week exhausted.”⁽³⁾

What do we do, when values collide? Jesus knew it was good to rest on the Sabbath. But he also knew it was good to feed the hungry and heal the sick—regardless of the day. And that, in a nutshell, was the clash of values. The Pharisees, on the one hand, regarded plucking grain, and then rubbing the grain with one’s hands to get the husk off, as work. In their mind, Jesus’ disciples were threshing! Jesus, on the other hand, asserts that alleviating human hunger on the Sabbath is a higher value and that the law must be flexible, giving way to the overriding importance of meeting human need.

Likewise, healing a man on the Sabbath, which the Pharisees deemed work, required the Pharisees in today’s story to choose between two alternatives—to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it.

Life is full of ethical dilemmas in which good values clash and collide. The Bible is too. Really? Yes! Jesus said so in today’s passage. When the Pharisees protest his disciples plucking grain to assuage their hunger on the Sabbath, Jesus takes them to their very own Bible. And he cites the behavior of David in 1 Samuel 21, who when hungry ate the consecrated bread of the presence given him by Ahimilek, the priest at the sanctuary of Nob. Not only does Jesus cite the Hebrew scripture as providing evidence of the clash of values, he transcends even the 10 Commandments by claiming that he is Lord of the Sabbath. And that means that meeting real humans needs such as hunger and sickness is more important than a legalistic “keeping the Sabbath.”

When scripture presents a clash of values, how do we decide which value to follow? Take the case of the role of women in the church. Frankly, I was amazed at the number of Protestant denominations in the USA who still oppose the ordination of women. (Look it up on the internet.) On what grounds? Largely on the basis of one passage of scripture, 1 Timothy 2:8-15 that says, “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, yet Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became the transgressor.” Do you buy that? That passage flies directly in the face of the genuine letters of the Apostle Paul, who noted that the Spirit calls women to ministries as evangelists, teachers, apostles (and thus preachers). It flies directly in the face of Paul in Galatians 3:28 who asserts that in Christ Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, free nor slave, for we are all one in Christ.

We Methodists do theology in community using the Wesleyan quadrilateral that asserts that the Christian faith is revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience and confirmed by reason. All four sources should be brought to bear on any particular issue. A single passage from 1 Timothy (not even written by Paul), would seem to exclude the ordination of women. But as Methodists, we examine other scriptural references and consult our tradition, our experience and our reason. In the end, the UMC supports full inclusion of women in every aspect of church life—including ordination and service as Bishops.

Exclusion is a terrible thing. The movie *Hidden Figures*, currently showing, vividly attests this. Movie critic Rob Thomas says, “in 2017, when the country feels so angry and divided as ever, *Hidden Figures* becomes more than just a well-made, inspiring and moving piece of entertainment...It tells the true story of Katherine Goble (and two other African American women, Dorothy Vaughn and Mary Johnson). Katherine Goble is a mathematician working for NASA in 1961. She’s brilliant, but her gifts are overlooked. She and other African American women are relegated to the ‘Colored Computer’ building at NASA’s facility in Langley, VA. Goble and her colleagues suffer countless indignities for being black in 1961 America. Even NASA, supposedly the embodiment of our country’s hopes and dreams for the future, is as retrograde as the rest of the country when it comes to race. African Americans are forced to use separate bathrooms and coffee pots, and NASA gives them no credit for their work...Integration finally comes when all other options have been exhausted. Goble makes herself belong by being indispensable, working harder and smarter than the white men around her.”(4)

Movie critic Matt Goldberg makes a crucial point when he says, “the movie shows how the hatefulness of discrimination doesn’t just hurt individuals, it hurts human progress.”(5) As we’re forced to watch Goble run back and forth across campus a half mile numerous times a day to use the Coloreds Only restroom, we realize “how she could have spent so much more time working on her calculations and helping America if America wasn’t screwing her over. The movie helps us see that by short-changing Goble and her African American colleagues, and countless other minorities, we are only hurting our country. Hate can only send us backward.”

As we look back over our denomination’s history, it is plain to see that we, too, have not only hurt individuals, but we have hurt ourselves, our communities and the world we seek to “transform” by excluding others. Racism caused black Methodist preacher Richard Allen to lead black members out of the Methodist Church in Philadelphia in 1816 to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest black owned and led institution in America. Other African American Methodist denominations also formed. The issue of slavery led to a schism at the General Conference of 1844 resulting in the Methodist Episcopal Church North and the MEC South. When the two denominations reunited to form the Methodist Church in 1939, the southerners demanded all African American churches be segregated and that they form their own Central Jurisdiction. This segregation was finally overcome in 1968 with the formation of the United Methodist Church. Racism and its accompanying exclusion hurt not only individuals, but Methodist Churches, their communities, our denomination and our witness in the world.

The same is true of women and their role in the church. Not until 1956 were full clergy rights granted to women in the Methodist Church. Their exclusion hurt not only individuals, but Methodist Churches, their communities, our denomination and our witness in the world.

Rev. Gil Caldwell, a retired African American United Methodist pastor, painfully recalls how his father, also a Methodist pastor, spent most of his ministry in the racially segregated Central Jurisdiction. Pastor Gil was himself excluded from the Methodist Duke Divinity School for being black. He recently states that “it is hard to comprehend why the UMC has continued to pass legislation that places limits on clergy in committed same gender relationships...Logic is torn to shreds when United Methodist clergy are able to bless buildings and animals and homes but are not allowed to bless the loving commitment of woman to woman and man to man. The United Methodist Church, as it did on matters of race, is lagging behind governmental actions and the attitudes of persons, particularly young persons, on acceptance and affirmation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons and couples...For those who claim they are maintaining tradition, I remind them that at one time persons maintained or tolerated colonialism, slavery, the oppression of women, racial segregation, prohibitions against the ordination of women and resistance to interracial marriage because they represented long-held ‘traditions.’ The breaking of tradition is what established Christianity in the first place as well as Protestantism.”(6)

I would go further than Rev. Gil Caldwell and argue that there are solid biblical grounds for affirming gay marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ persons (whether single or married). By singling out LGBTQ persons’ behavior as “incompatible with Christian teaching;” by disallowing self-avowed, practicing gays and lesbians from ordination; by not allowing clergy to perform gay and lesbian marriages; and by not allowing such marriages to take place in United Methodist Churches; I strongly believe that discrimination against LGBTQ persons not only continues to hurt individuals and families, but United Methodist churches, our communities, our denomination and our mission and witness in the world.

“One Sabbath, Jesus went into a synagogue and was teaching. And a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. Jesus said to the man, ‘Get up, and stand in front of everyone.’ So he got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?” (Luke 6:6-9)

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Sources:

- (1) Robert C. Tannehill, *Abingdon NT Commentaries: Luke*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, pp. 110-113.
- (2) Elizabeth Johnson, *Working Preacher*, January 27, 2013
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) Rob Thomas, *Movie review of Hidden Figures*, The Capital Times, January 6, 2017.
- (5) Matt Goldberg, *Fighting Racism in the Space Race*, movie review in Collider, January 4, 2017.
- (6) Rev. Gil Caldwell, “United Methodist’s God-given call to inclusion,” *On Faith*, April, 30, 2012.