

Mark 2:23-6:6
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On Power and Responsibility

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23 One sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" 25 And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26 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." 27 Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; 28 so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

3:1 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. 2 They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3 And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." 4 Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. 5 He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Today I'd like to share some thoughts about power and responsibility.

The Easter-Pentecost season is over and we now enter what the church calls "ordinary time". Ordinary time isn't a season itself, but rather the time between festive seasons. This is the second of two in the year: the first goes from the Feast of Epiphany to Ash Wednesday. In Ordinary time, we read through one of the gospels. So it's back to Mark, which our lectionary will take us through from now until the first Sunday in Advent.

You recall that things happen quickly in Mark—"immediately," to use this writer's favorite word. Even though we're only in the second chapter, Jesus is already in hot water with the religious authorities.

The Sabbath police are all over him. You would think that he and the disciples were hoodlums for plucking a few grains of wheat off of the stalk. And then to heal on the Sabbath, and in the place of worship: an outrage!

Commentator Mark Skinner wrote that Jesus' actions not only were compassionate, they were also consistent with Jewish teaching. God created the Sabbath for the benefit, the health, the restoration of human kind and all of creation. That's the gist of today's lesson from Deuteronomy.

The Pharisees disagree fundamentally with Jesus about the interpretation of the 'law,' the teaching about Sabbath. Though the Pharisees are antagonists in the gospel, they weren't evil. They were learned. And they had power—the authority that came with their learning.

Challenging their interpretation in word and deed, Jesus challenged their power. That's why it became so serious: Jesus raised the question of who is in charge. He threatened the existing order. Whether or not there was really a conspiracy to kill Jesus at this early stage in his ministry, here the gospel writer foretells the end of the story. Jesus will die in a conspiracy between religious authorities and the Romans. Strange bedfellows, indeed, these two forces united to defeat a person whom they believed threatened the power of each.

The Pharisees were the religious elite. And elites—like all human beings—once in power, are reluctant to give it up, or even to share it.

Power.

It's pretty clear that perceptions about power and realities of power pervade the divisions in our country. My generation, the post-war baby boomers, have always had been a powerful force in this society. Great in number, we had the privilege of growing up in a time of relative peace and real prosperity, when this country was at the acme of respect and influence around the world.

We came of age with the meritocracy, the principle that people rise to lead through their own education and talent rather than their parents' wealth and social status. That core principle flung open doors of opportunity to women, minorities and people of all classes to live the American dream. But it also sowed the seeds of a new socio-economically privileged ruling class, a new elite of "merit," and new set of dividing lines between winners and losers.

Particularly since the 2016 election, soul searching about our current social and political mess has produced some thoughtful writing—by meritocratic elites themselves. David Brooks regularly takes it up on *The New York Times* op-ed pages including a good recent piece, "The Strange Failure of the Educated Elite." Last year there was economist Richard Reeves' book *Dream Hoarders*.

The very latest, published this week, is a book called *Tailspin*, by Stephen Brill. I read an adaptation article online from *Time Magazine* of May 17 with the catchy title "How Baby Boomers Broke America."

Brill is a baby-boomer and a meritocrat par excellence, who went from simple origins to Yale University and Yale Law School. Brill traces the 50-year decline in our crumbling infrastructure along with the decline in America's leadership in education, health, and income equality. He sees our fundamental division as between the "protected" and "unprotected". Ironically, the "protected" are those whose wealth and power shield them from the need for effective government; for them and their businesses, government is the enemy; regulations are a stumbling block. The "unprotected," on the other hand, depend on government for education and for health and safety.

With an insider's knowledge, and admitting his own part in it, he details how the brilliant, driven members of his generation "... used what makes America great—the First Amendment, due process, financial and legal ingenuity, free markets and free trade," to create the "protected" class for themselves and the corporations for which they worked, and to bend government to their will. For instance, their First-Amendment arguments loosed hoards of lobbyists. This cohort also gave us such risky financial innovations as derivatives and credit default swaps, as well as the hedge funds, leveraged buyouts and stock buybacks that brought profits to stockholders but focused on short-term profits rather than long-term growth. Unbounded, they gave us the crash of 2008 and then used their legal skills to protect those at the top from culpability.

Brill writes, "Their money, their power, their lobbyists, their lawyers, their drive overwhelmed the institutions that were supposed to hold them accountable—government agencies, Congress, the courts."

Brill ends on a note of hope, ticking off examples "in every arena" of meritocrats who are "equally talented, equally driven achievers...who are pushing back". One leads a non-profit that trains displaced workers for software engineering jobs. Others are fighting the power of lobbyists, with the support of legislators from both parties.

I have hope, too, because history shows that with God's help, the forces of good always overcome evil. But having been part of the problem I need to be part of the solution. As well-educated person of comfortable means, I belong to an elite, too. Like the Pharisees, I have let my privilege shield me from the truth of other people's suffering and vulnerability. Isolating myself in comfort where I have chosen to live, and with the company I keep, I have unwittingly played a part in the divisions in our society.

Many of you work on the front lines, caring and advocating for the "unprotected". You may be glad that folks like me and Stephen Brill and David Brooks are finally beginning to "be 'woke'," to be aware: to accept the truth about our power, and embrace the responsibility that comes with it to change ourselves and to work for change more actively politically and personally.

That includes seeking out the voices I don't usually hear, from people who--like Jesus with the Pharisees--are speaking their truth to power. I'm grateful for Craig's and Rie's suggestion to read some of the eye-opening and heart-rending essays written by people of color in *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota*. I need to do more of that kind of reading. A bigger stretch for me—and vital--will be trying to open my mind and heart to people of my own race, whose politics and worldview are diametrically different from mine.

One of the essays in *A Good Time for the Truth* was written by David Lawrence Grant, an African-American writer for screen and stage. He tells the story of an encounter with a local auto mechanic of Scandinavian descent, who doesn't have time to replace Lawrence's broken regulator on the spot. When pushed, the cranky old man agrees to show him how to do it. Brought together "by chance," as they work side by side sharing stories, each learns about the other's humanity, bridging the differences of age, race and culture that otherwise would separate them.

Grant concludes, "If we are to sort ourselves out and make good lives for ourselves in this ever-more-multi-cultural landscape, we've got to start by talking less and listening more. We can listen—really listen—to one another's stories and learn from them".

Each of us has a part to play in healing our broken society and saving our democracy.

May the God of peace and justice give us the courage and strength to do that work.