

“Fragile Treasures”
Dorothy Churn LaPenta
Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church
6-3-18 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 2:23-3:6, 2 Corinthians 4:5-11

Last year a University of Maryland law student wrote an opera called Ginsburg and Scalia about the two “best buddies” but very different Supreme Court justices who served together beginning in the 1980s until Scalia’s death in 2016. Now this opera has not yet made to the Metropolitan in New York City. But who knows?

The opera poses the question, “What would happen if two ideologically opposed judges had to appear before a higher power?”

Ginsburg and Scalia could not have been more different in their opinions or law interpretation, opposite ends of the political spectrum. In spite of all their differences, they were dear friends.

They shared many interests including a love of opera that prompted this law student to compose this opera about them. The part of Ginsburg is played by a coloratura soprano, and the part of Scalia is played by a dramatic tenor.

We all know what happens when sopranos and tenors share the stage. There’s a little competition for the limelight as he is dramatically determined to get his points across only as she gets higher and louder in making her views known.

The opera concludes with these words.

“We are different! We are one! We are different in our interpretation of written texts, rarely on the same side in controversial issues. But we are one in our reverence for the Constitution and the institution we serve.”¹

They had intense arguments and fought tooth and nail with a good and fair spirit. They made each other better. Ginsburg said that Scalia would often help her with her arguments. He would say, “Well, I am certainly not going to say this, but what would make your argument stronger is....” and he would continue to give her prompts and she did the same for him. They listened to one another and accepted those times of agreeing to disagree, and yet when it was necessary, one did not hesitate to let the other know in their legal rhetoric, “I think you are wrong and it’s not okay.”

Different in their interpretation, but one in the way they treasured the Constitution, understanding that interpretation is often required and the spirit in which to enter those discussions.

The Rev. Joanna Adams points out in a sermon, “The Pharisees and Scribes of Jesus’ day, although religious leaders were in many ways like the Supreme Court of the United States. They

¹ Scalia/Ginsburg by Derrick Wang, www.derrickwang.com

performed a socially necessary function in interpreting the Jewish Law so that people could use it to shape their lives. Their disputes over proper interpretation were as necessary a part of their religious landscape as our Supreme Court decisions are part of our civic landscape.”²

In the time Mark’s Gospel was written around 80 A.D. (or in the Common Era), the Pharisees’ beliefs and interpretations became the foundational liturgical and ritualistic basis for the practice of rabbinic Judaism.

I have often felt that the Pharisees that we read about in the New Testament have been given a bad rap. They treasured the law that God had given to the Israelites on Mount Sinai and they held a responsibility for interpretation and maintaining the law so that peoples’ lives could be shaped by it.

So, we have to be careful about stereotyping the Pharisees so that every time we read the word “Pharisee” in scripture, we don’t think, “Hmm! Bad guys.”

Now, having said all of this, what’s happening in our Gospel text this morning is NOT a good and fair spirited discussion about interpreting the law. That is not what is taking place in this story.

We can relate. Many of today’s conversations in our political climate are NOT good spirited-fair conversations on either side. We know that. We know that much of the talk that takes place is not about the love of our laws and our history as a nation. It’s about who has the majority, who is dominant, who is in charge, who is in power. In some of the speech and rhetoric that is happening today, we are not making each other better because it’s not about compromise and decisions and authentic attempts at interpretation. It’s about who holds the power.

That’s what happening in this morning’s text from *Mark*.

The religious leaders are frankly not interested in the law. They are interested in getting Jesus out of their way because he is a threat to their authority. These religious leaders were not treasuring the law and their grave and difficult responsibility to interpret it. These leaders were treasuring their status, their authority and their power. That was at stake. Jesus was making them feel fragile and vulnerable and that had to stop.

Jesus’ disciples are plucking grain on the Sabbath because they have traveled, they have worked hard and they are hungry. Jesus uses this to make to make an even bigger argument for those who know hunger. To paraphrase what Jesus is saying, “So we are going to tell someone who is starving that they cannot eat on the Sabbath when food becomes available to them? We are going to tell someone who is hurting that they have to wait for help and healing? That’s not our law.” These leaders did not care about the man’s withered hand. They cared that they were going to lose their upper hand.

² Joanna Adams. “Treasure in Clay Jars.” 1998.

Jesus knew the law every bit as well as this group of religious leaders. Pheme Perkins, a New Testament scholar, has stated that any rabbi in Jesus' day would not have disputed the question Jesus poses, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" Doing good and saving life always took precedence over Sabbath obligations. There's no evidence to support that the Jewish people of Jesus' day were such rigid legalists that they would walk past someone in need. Anyone who really cared and loved the law would agree with Jesus.³

So, Jesus is exposing these leaders asking them what the law is really about and then exposing their malice by healing the man with the withered hand right in front of them.

They have been shamed with the truth. So, these leaders join with another group, the Herodians, to make a plan to get rid of this Jesus who has dishonored them with his truth-telling.

We cannot picture this story in our minds without noticing Jesus' reaction. "He looked around at them with anger. He was grieved at their hardness of heart."

It's not often that we get the details about Jesus' reactions. So whenever we do, we need to pay attention.

Jesus is sad, grieved. Jesus is angry as he realizes just how hardened his opponents have become. They have cut themselves off from any possibility of accepting and hearing what Jesus is trying to say. And it's not okay. Jesus would be willing to have a fair and good spirited discussion, but he is not willing to accept a heretical interpretation of the law that attends only to the self-serving purposes of these religious leaders.⁴

I understand why Jesus is angry. But why is Jesus so sad? Why didn't Jesus just throw up his hands and walk away and say, "You guys aren't worth it."

Why is Jesus so sad?

Our text from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians might help us answer this question. In the reading this morning from *2 Corinthians* Chapter 4, we have not been described as hard, unbending, rigid pots where light cannot get in and roots cannot expand. We are clay pots, earthen vessels that God has called to hold a treasure.

That treasure is the Gospel, the news that God brought to the world in Jesus Christ, the news of hope, of grace, of resurrection, the assurance that when afflicted, perplexed, struck down, weary and frustrated we are not crushed. We are not destroyed. We are not destined for despair forever. This is the Gospel and we are carriers who receive it and give it.

We are clay pots and the Gospel is what God gives us to hold with love and reverence and humility, **but not rigidity.**

³ Pheme Perkins. "The Gospel of Mark" in *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Abingdon Press, Nashville: 1995, pp. 556-560.

⁴ Ched Myers. *Binding The Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. Orbis Books, New York: 2002, pp.157-162.

Have you ever planted in terra cotta pots? They chip, they break, they weather because they're porous, the light can get in, water and nourishment can be absorbed and roots can expand. They're fragile. They break. I once had a terra cotta pot that held a beautiful, flowering mandevilla. One day I went out to water and the pot had broken into several pieces. I was ready to pick it up and transplant the mandevilla into another pot but my friend said, "No, leave it! It will be all right. It will adapt. Wait and see what happens." He was right. The pot contained this treasure of a beautiful plant in a different way. The vine grew through the breaks and the cracks and produced beautiful flowers and grew tall and kept expanding.

We are clay pots, and we are fragile. We break and crack and chip, and when the roots expand and the light gets in, it changes us and we adapt and hold the treasure a little differently.

It's not our fragility that makes Jesus sad. It's our rigidity. It's when we become hardened and impenetrable with resentful and unmovable heels dug in so deeply that the only things that can bubble up are hostility, resentment, and fear.⁵

Does what we treasure and hold dear align with the treasure God has placed in us? Do we sometimes need to let go a little? Do we need to embrace our fragility instead of resisting it? Do we need to love our vulnerability and understand that it's all right to always to be learners of the faith? Do we need to crack and break open in some areas? Do we need to expand our roots and let some light inside?

Sometimes the fragile "clay jarness" of our human existence is hard to accept.⁶ But God continues to call us and to use us placing within us these amazing purposes in spreading God's unconditional love that can, at times, be beyond our human understanding. We don't always "get" what God is doing and yet through and in us, God continues to be at work.

The Rev. Anthony Robinson tells a story about a church in one of our large cities who was struggling to accept some huge challenges and changes in their community. They were being asked to do some different and "out of the box things" in their ministry in the neighborhood where they served. The pastor called a congregational meeting that turned quite contentious as heels dug in and confusion and fear surmounted. One of the elders who attended had her fourteen-year old grandson with her that weekend. After the meeting, she turned to him and said, "What did you think of that, Charlie?" It was a rhetorical question. She didn't expect an answer. But Charlie answered, "Grammy, the truth upsets people. All of you are going to need to read the Bible. And you are going to need to be brave, but it's all right to not feel strong right now."⁷

We have this treasure in clay jars that comes, not from us, but from God. May we hold it with all the love and reverence that we can muster, but may we hold it carefully with awe and humility.

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

⁵ Joanna Adams.

⁶ Joanna Adams.

⁷ Anthony Robinson. Transforming Congregations.