

It was 1982. I had graduated college, found a job and was living rent free at my parents home. And it was Thanksgiving, the time of year when we would gather together. My sister and brother would come in from Indiana to Illinois, along with my brother's best friend, Larry - who was family. We would have turkey, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole and stuffing. And don't forget the pies! Pecan, Minced Meat and Pumpkin. Except this year – this year my mother decided to give us a Bon Appetit Thanksgiving. That meant candied ham, champagne cabbage, carrots with parsley – but no mashed potatoes! No Green Bean Casserole. It was my brother's friend who expressed aloud what we all were thinking. He said, "Mom, where's my drumstick!" My mother looked up with shock, and as good family members, we all dug into dinner and enjoyed every bite. You see, Thanksgiving Dinner was our Sacred Cow, and my mother had dared to change it!

Sacred Cow is a term that originated out of the Hindu religion, speaking to their belief that cows are sacred animals and should never be harmed. Some time in the late 1800's, the phrase was usurped in America to point to a person or belief, or a practice "immune from question or criticism", usually one that has been respected for a long time. Today, we commonly use the term Sacred Cow to refer to ideas, people and things that have been so deeply embedded in us or our society, that if one would suggest it ought to be changed, we would fight back.

Our gospel from Mark finds Jesus taking on one of the sacred cows of his day: the Sabbath - the one Holy day of rest each week that is honored by the Jewish people. But it's not because he rejects it, or wants it to go away. Rather, it is about perspective, and begs the question: has the ritual of sabbath, and the rigidity of following its rules taken priority over the needs of the people; Jesus seems to wonder if the ritual and its rules matter more to religious leaders than the people they have been called to serve.

Jesus has arrived on the scene — new, fresh, bold, and charismatic. People are drawn to him, and so the Pharisees are watching. They note that his disciples have picked grains of wheat on the Sabbath and they bear first hand witness to the healing of a disabled man's hands in the temple. And they are upset.

Both of these actions seem to disregard what the Pharisees hold sacred: The Law of Sabbath, which is rooted in their interpretation of the Law.

So what is the law of Sabbath, and why does it matter?

- First, The Pharisees were the temple leaders, the ones responsible for setting and maintaining religious order for the people. I can tell you as your priest that

this is a responsibility religious leaders take seriously. We desire for your worship experience to be meaningful and beautiful.

- The Law, as interpreted by these leaders, was at the center of religious life. It gave order and meaning to people's lives and helped them to know what to do, when and how to do it, and why it mattered.
- Passed down through Genesis, to Moses, in the Deuteronomic laws and the subject of many a debate between rabbis for centuries - the Sabbath was deemed a non-negotiable 24-hour period of time, set aside for prayer and worship, rest, renewal and shared meals. It came with rules: handwashing, what foods to eat, and particularly the absence of any expression of work. This was how one honored God. Sabbath was akin to Jewish Identity.

So, witnessing something akin to work (the pulling of wheat buds off the stalk) the leaders question Jesus. And Jesus defends, pointing instead to God's call to compassionately meet people in their need.

Jesus says, "***The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath***".

Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath is that it was a gift from God, given to humankind, so that they might rest from their labors, remember their history and praise/honor God.

Next, he beckons a man with a withered hand to come forward, and poses to the leaders what we today would understand to be a trick question: ***Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to heal or to kill?***

If they side with good, then they affirm Jesus' words and interpretation; and if they side with bad, they would stand counter to God's call to love and tend ones neighbor. They are stuck, and in their resistance, are silent.

Within the context of God's call to love neighbor as self, Jesus considers the healing of a disabled man's hand to be a holy and compassionate act, not a breaking of the law. But most profoundly, the Pharisees' response saddens and angers him. How could they be so callous as to find any pleasure in the man's restoration?

Here, Jesus clearly prioritizes compassion for human need over strict ritual adherence, whereas the Pharisees cling tightly to the law and the enforcement of it, sadly

presenting themselves as rigid and unyielding. They seem more concerned with the rules being followed than the needs of people the Sabbath was created for. And this distresses Jesus. Their quickness to condemn the disciples' actions, and callous hardness of heart frustrates him.

You see, God's work often involves reinterpreting traditions to reveal deeper truths and new possibilities. Jesus, God made flesh, here boldly re-interprets the Sabbath, expanding what it means to honor the Sabbath to include tending to those in need with acts of compassion, rather than excluding them. For Jesus, hunger and healing cannot wait nor are to be put on hold until tomorrow. Today, now, this moment, is the time to respond to the world's need — as a holy act of Sabbath and honoring God.

But Let's be clear - Jesus' was a radical view of the law, and it confronted the status quo, causing them to respond with resistance and anger of their own. We must note that Jesus wasn't *against* the Sabbath. As a devout Jew, He himself practiced it; worshiping and preaching in the synagogues, honoring the tradition. What we have here is Jesus, God incarnate, who came into the world not to rubber stamp all things, but to take what is sacred and holy, the God-given ritual of Sabbath that invites one into deeper communion with God, and to expand it — so that it includes not just some, but all people, beginning with Israel, and ultimately expanding to include all nations. Jesus came to elicit something new — a new understanding, a new expression of God, right before their eyes. We can see this clearly today, but for those experiencing him first-hand, it was radical, confronting, and worth fighting against.

Now, resistance to change is a common human response, so it is perhaps not too surprising that the religious leaders' response was resistance and resentment. Jesus by his words and by his actions seems to call their authority into question. Of course, they respond defensively. Of course, they want to prove him wrong — to convince others that he is the outlier, he is the radical. So vested in this are they, that many of them are incapable of even dialoguing about it. It hasn't dawned on them that there might be something here for them to learn — that God might be speaking to them.

We, of course, know what this feels like to have our beloved resources and traditions challenged . In the Episcopal Church over the last 100 years, our hymnal and our prayer book have been, dare I say it, "changed". And with every new version, with each new expression or expansion, or re-interpretation, there are some among us who resist and who defend against the change; who mourn the loss of their "sacred cow".

Mostly, we get comfortable with how things are, what we know, and we really just want things to stay the same so we can, too. But this is not how God works, nor how the Spirit works in our lives. With each new generation, the Spirit comes, speaking change and possibility into our beings — nudging, pushing, and confronting us to expand ourselves and our understanding of God and God's law, so that all people may be included.

And, I think we can also imagine that the Pharisees experienced some fear. Fear of this itinerant preacher whose words and being has drawn throngs of people to him, and whose new, fresh and radical interpretations have caused those same throngs to question the structures and processes that have long been in place. Perhaps they fear that they will lose power, or status. Perhaps they fear that it is they who may disappear in the shadow of Jesus? Often, when we are afraid, especially when we feel that we are at risk of losing something sacred and important to us, our response is to do everything we can to stop the change.

Because change is uncomfortable.
Because change threatens our way of being.
Because change demands that “we” change.

So how are we to embrace change in our lives?

Some change in our church comes in the form of rituals and structures. In late June, delegates of the Episcopal Church will meet at General Convention in Louisville, Kentucky with the express purpose of discussing, debating and voting on whether or not to make changes to our corporate life.

One of the changes to come is the election of a new Presiding Bishop. Bishop Michael Curry's 9-year tenure will come to an end in November of this year, and a new presiding bishop to be elected from a slate of five nominees will be elected. No matter which man or woman is elected, we can be certain that they will bring change.

On the other hand, there are resolutions to be presented to convention that have the capacity to alter our corporate and personal lives of faith — from proposed changes to the prayer book, to the way that we operate and worship, to whom we include and how. This is the slow and steady work of our church, and although none of it happens quickly or without great prayer and consideration, the truth is that change does and will come. We may think we have no choice but to welcome it, or to reject it, but that is not

necessarily true. What if we chose to “try it on”. To “give it a chance, to consider it, and to see what gifts the change might bring”. What might we discover?

Rather than be people who flat out resist change, Jesus invites us to be people to open their hearts and minds to “what if”. He calls us to be willing to imagine, to wonder — to ask questions so as to gain insight into what the change represents, why it ought to be made, and its potential impact upon us. Of course, we know that the simple change of a name, or a pronoun (Like calling the Holy Spirit “she” instead of “he” or “it”) can cause great distress — still, Jesus came to bring a new way, to usher in change, and we must be open to God’s ever evolving work in our midst.

Jesus articulates his understanding of the Spirit of the Law, one that focuses on expressing love, showing compassion, and bestowing mercy. Although Jesus never condemns the sabbath or any sacred cow of the Jewish people, he is vested in helping the Pharisees understand how their viewpoint limits their ability to act in ways that God prescribes.

And we need this insight too. Our own viewpoints, our attachments to what is so, can certainly get in the way of our acting and responding to the needs of others in the way Christ calls us to do so. Jesus knows change is hard — he knows that we cling tightly to what we love, are familiar with, and what we have always done. Yet, he came to remind us that life is not static, and to invite us to open our hearts and minds to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives — to trust that it will lead and guide us on the way we should go, to trust that it is in changing that we experience new life, new possibilities. If we try to trust in God’s wisdom, and are willing to be open to change, Christ will lead us to a fuller expression of love and compassion in our lives, right here, right now. So what are the sacred cows in your life that you are clinging to? And how might they be holding you back? How might they be keeping you from living and loving fully? I encourage you to take time tonight to reflect and identify your sacred cows, and then to consider where you might let go, just a bit, so that something fresh and new might enter in. You might be surprised!