

**Second Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
3 June 2018**

Mark 2:23-3:6

I am glad I have so many of you here at church today, especially after the busy weekend we had with the Walker Percy festival. Welcome to all of you who are visiting us for the first time. Now, let me share with all of you a dream that I just had. Jesus appeared to me in this dream and convinced me that I need to ask you all for help to advance our ministry at Grace. Jesus told me to ask you for 54 million dollars to purchase a very special horse. This horse will allow me to be at Wyanoke and Laurel Hill in a matter of seconds. This horse will take me to Angola in less than a minute. Having this horse will facilitate my ability to preach the Gospel and reach all the heathens of West Feliciana Parish. The Lord will bless you tenfold if you donate these 54 million to the church.

For those who have no idea what I am talking about in my tongue-in-cheek dismissive way, I am referring to Rev. DuPlantis, a tele-evangelist from Louisiana, from where all good things come, who is asking his audience to purchase him a new plane in the amount of 54 million dollars. Now, before you laugh, let me tell you that about 10 years ago he asked for a 12 million dollar plane and his viewers paid for it in record time. So, 54 million may not be out of the question. Now, I will tell you a bit later how Mr. DuPlantis fits within my sermon. For now, let us talk about the Gospel.

We are just 79 verses within the Gospel of Mark and Jesus is already in trouble. In the passage today the Pharisees and Herodians are walking along with Jesus and his disciples as they travel from one village to the next. As they walk, the disciples pluck up heads of grain and begin to eat them. The Pharisees are incensed and complain to Jesus, "Why do they do what is not legal to do (proper, customary, appropriate...)? What they are talking about is not the actual plucking off of the heads of grain. There is an old Levitical allowance called the "Gleaming". It demands that several feet of land between the roads and the farms be left to travelers, the poor, the destitute to pick from and eat. Remember the story of Ruth in the Old Testament. This is still the case at the time of Jesus. The Pharisees complaints are not about the taking of the grain, but, rather, the violation of the Sabbath. No work could be done on the Sabbath day. Even walking from a village to another village could be seen as work. The plucking of grain is definitely work. These two behaviors could be seen as a violation of Sabbath and the Pharisees are upset about this.

Jesus responds to their criticism by allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, or rather, by allowing Scripture to diagnose and interpret the situation. Using a text from 1 Samuel 21:6, Jesus reminds the Pharisees of an episode when David and his men were running away from King Saul, who wanted to kill him. At some point, the harassed and exhausted David enters the temple. He and his men are starving and the High Priest allows them to eat the bread of the presence, which only the High Priest was allowed to eat. Jesus then concludes the story by saying, "The Sabbath was made for humanity and not humanity for the Sabbath." The Pharisees have heard this argument before. Several of the Rabbis had preached things like, "Profane the Sabbath, if you must, to save a life, for by doing so the person saved will celebrate many Sabbaths". What they find objectionable is the person who is doing the teaching. This is not one of the famous Rabbis. In their eyes, this man was nothing but a peasant. He did not train under a famous Rabbi. He did not come from a High Priestly family. In fact, they know very little about him. To make

matters worse, he is from Galilee! How dare he pretend that he had anything to teach? How dare he reinterpret centuries of theology around the Sabbath?

Perhaps the most offensive statement of all is when Jesus says, "The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." Not only is this peasant preacher attempting to reinterpret the theology of the Sabbath, he is also claiming to be the "Son of Man" (Code name for Messiah), and, therefore, to be Lord over the Sabbath. He is claiming to be the Son of God. This is, at best, complete nonsense and, at worst, blasphemy! Now, upon arrival at the synagogue, and almost as if to prove that he was Lord over the Sabbath, Jesus asks, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" They remain silent because they know well that it is very proper to save a life during the Sabbath, likewise, it was allowed to save the life of an animal or a slave in peril. Jesus then calls a man with a withered hand and restores him to health. This restoration allows the man to pursue employment, care for a family, attend Temple once again (as a beggar he would have been considered impure or uncleaned and therefore not allowed in), and join the community fully. This healing is a wholistic restoration that goes beyond just being able to use his hand.

The passage ends by telling us something very interesting, "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." This is fascinating because these two groups are as opposite as any two groups can be. The Herodians are the followers of King Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. You remember Herod the Great because of the killing of the innocent children when Jesus was born. Herod the Great was also famous because he began the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. This was a massive structure that took almost a hundred years to build. In fact, Herod Antipas, his son, was responsible for the continuation of construction after the death of his father. Both father and son were enamored with Hellenistic culture and all that it had to offer: the teaching of greek language, the symposiums, the olympic games, the establishment of gymnasiums in major cities, the erection of pagan temples throughout the land, etc. Unity through culture, might be their motto. For them, the Pharisees were a threat to this hellenistic goal of spreading Greek culture and traditions throughout the land.

The Pharisees are the descendants of the those who returned from the exile in Babylon. They believe that Israel's only chance for peace, security, progress, and blessing is the obedience of every letter of the Law of Moses (the 10 commandments) and all the various rules and ordinances derived from these over the centuries. They see in Hellenism a great threat because many of the tenants of Hellenism were contrary to the Law. They discouraged marriage between Jews and foreigners, they disliked the Gentiles (Hellenistic nations and peoples), they prohibited any association with those who practiced pagan religions, they protected their children from Hellenistic practices like symposia or gymnasiums, etc. In other words, they saw in the Herodians as big a threat as they saw in the "Ethnos" or Gentile Nations themselves.

Yet, both of these groups now join forces and conspire against Jesus. This Nazarene is bad news for business. His preaching and teaching is a threat to the Jewish orthodoxy as practiced by the Pharisees. He places the Law at the service of humanity and not the other way around, he calls himself the Son of God, he claims to be the Messiah, etc. Jesus is also bad news for the Herodians. He claims to be the rightful king of Israel (Remember that Herod is king of large sections of Israel at this time), he opposes Hellenism because he preaches the equal value of all God's children, whereas Hellenism

has great stratification between those of high, Patrician classes, and the poor and uneducated members of society. He preaches the establishment of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom filled with love and equality, whereas the Hellenists preach things like Stoicism, Epicureanism, Enlightened Egoism, etc.

79 verses into Mark and we already see two great powers, two totally different ideological systems, and two very unlikely bedfellows begin to plot against Jesus. And this brings us back to the Reverend DuPlantis. All ideological systems have the propensity to devolve into heartlessness and selfishness. All human institutions have the risk of devolving into materialistic rationalizations that lead to the exploitation and manipulation of others. All religions and denominations can be reduced to a set of moralistic principles that place their law, doctrinal creeds, and traditions ahead of their people. All churches and all preachers can create powerful "Cool-Aide" for their members to drink, so they can justify their greed, harmonize their theological incongruity, and baptize the lack of nexus between what they believe and how they live out their faith. All human endeavor can become Godless. Jesus of Nazareth is a threat to any system that places things or rules above people. And he is a threat to all those who use his name to fundraise for planes or yachts.

Mr. DuPlantis is a wonderful chemist who has created a powerful Cool-Aide. I beg you not to drink it, however. He imposes heavy burdens in the name of Jesus, while living a lavished lifestyle. But, I am here to remind you that the humble and relatable Messiah who died for you and who died for me doesn't need a helicopter or a plane. He doesn't need blind obedience to the Law. He doesn't need blind obedience to heartless philosophies. He doesn't even need your money. All he needs is faith, love of God and love of neighbor. May he continue to bless you. Amen!