

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12; John 5:1-18
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I heard someplace that Napoleon ordered his soldiers to wear jackets with buttons on the sleeves to prevent them from wiping their noses on their uniforms. This is why men's sportcoats today have two or three useless buttons at the end of each sleeve. The buttons are an example of something that began for a very practical reason, and now serve no practical purpose, yet is retained for the sake of appearances. There are plenty of other examples like this from modern life: The plastic hubcaps on my car, wearing camouflage pants to the shopping mall, caffeine-free Diet Coke, maybe Ralph Nader's current presidential candidacy, and until recently - Krista Harmon's appendix. None of these things is bad in itself, but it would be odd if I was to tell you that you should only wear jackets with buttons on the sleeves or keep your appendix in your abdomen just because that's what most people do.

Today's lesson from John illuminates some of the tension which John's early Christian community faced as they tried to make sense of past religious practices in a new context. The author seems to be setting Jesus up for trouble. The invalid had lain by the pool for 38 years. Couldn't Jesus have delayed for one more day? No – Jesus heals the man in a show of mercy and power – on the Sabbath. The Pharisees miss the miracle entirely –they just don't want people walking around with mattresses on the Sabbath, because that violated the letter of the law which they enforced in order to retain power over other Jews. They were much more concerned with power and authority than with honoring the Sabbath.

If Jesus' offense is serious, it's nothing compared to what comes next. The Pharisees condemn Jesus for violating the fourth commandment about the Sabbath and he responds by invoking the first commandment, claiming to be the Lord. This would be like someone getting pulled over for speeding and then saying, "No, officer, I can drive as fast as I want. I'm God." The story is now about Jesus' identity and the nature of God. Jesus' claim to be the Son of God was blasphemous and it challenged the very concept of monotheism. What's more, Jesus challenged the authority of the religious leaders. He told them that they didn't know the first thing about God, about himself.

The Gospel makes it very clear in the last verse: “For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.” The Pharisees decided to kill him.

In today’s Old Testament reading, the writers of Ezekiel project a vision of a restored promised land for the broken-hearted Israelites in Babylon. Ezekiel imagines a new temple from which a stream flows to irrigate the desert and re-make Israel as a new Eden. The LORD, whose presence resided in the temple, was the source of that nourishment. Back to the first century. John’s Gospel was written not too long after the Roman Army destroyed the Jewish temple which Ezekiel had imagined. This created an identity crisis for Judaism. After this the Pharisees took a larger role in Jewish life they tried to eliminate sectarian divisions. John’s community was wrestling with a new Christian relationship to the Torah. In a sense the Pharisees and the Jewish Christians were arguing over who “owns” the temple now, who owns the source from which God will irrigate the world and bring forth new life. Today’s lesson tries to settle it loud and clear: Jesus himself is the presence of God in the world. For proclaiming that, these early Christians were persecuted.

So, back to those buttons on sportcoats, plastic hubcaps and Krista Harmon’s missing internal organs. The commandment to keep the Sabbath holy was perfectly legitimate if it meant that a faithful person rested from work and worshipped God. That was the point of it. But the Pharisees are using Sabbath observance to maintain a chokehold on religious authority. The Pharisees have lost touch with the spirit of the Sabbath and have hardened their piety into crusty dogma.

But maybe we should cut the Pharisees some slack, because this is a very human thing to do. Religious behavior is metaphor. Religious texts, imagery, worship and traditions may be the means through which people express their understanding of truth from a particular, finite perspective. These things aren’t truth itself, but point towards it, describing part of it, but they can’t enclose the truth because they’re finite. God is way too big to fit within the limits of human imagination. If we mistake metaphors for truth itself, they harden as dogma, and sometimes humans beat each other over the

head with their hardened dogma just because someone else is using a different metaphor. I think this has happened to the Pharisees. Jesus' connection to God threatens them so much that they want to kill him in order to survive.

Many of us here in this chapel today are religious leaders in our communities, in institutions and in the wider world. Today's Gospel is a sober warning about our relationship to prophetic voices in the world, which threaten institutions by their very nature. With this in mind, I think we need to hold our own metaphors loosely, maybe gently. I am not saying that we should view the Anglican tradition in a relativistic way, but that we should use our shared stories playfully, bringing them into contact with other ways of approaching God, almost like two people dancing. They can be independent, but in playful tension with each other.

I've been thinking about the survey of the American religious landscape by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that was published last week. It shows an abundance of religious experience in this country. Part of me wishes that people would just settle down in their mainline denominations again, fill up the pews and let us get on with being a proper Church. But they won't. Either the world has changed or the religious landscape has always been more complex than we thought it was. This country is awash in competing religious metaphors. America is like the Great Barrier Reef of religious behavior.

As lay and ordained ministers of the church, I think this provides an exciting and a pretty intimidating challenge for us. We know the traditions of Anglicanism very well, and we can speak with conviction from that foundation. We have the opportunity to bring our traditions into conversation with a world that is just bursting with religious curiosity. Unlike Jesus in today's lesson, we can't speak directly for God. But we can share what we've learned about trying to be in relationship with God. We can share our incredible family stories with other people who are seeking God in different ways—in other churches, and out on their own in the wide world. This can breathe new life into our tradition. As we share ourselves, we can let their other people's experiences of God enliven our own churches.

In classes here we often joke that Episcopalians invite people to come into our churches to become just like us. But that's not enough. It's not just about making new

Episcopalians. It's about building the kingdom of God by recognizing God in our neighbors, and working together to love God with all our hearts, minds and souls.

Amen.