Protesting in Public
(Mark 2:23-3:6)

I was born amidst the tectonic upheaval of the 1960s. Viet Nam. Civil Rights. Assassinations. Urban riots. Landing a man on the moon. My-Lai. Flower Power. LSD. Woodstock. Kent State. The Manson Family murders.

People took to the streets, protesting injustice and corruption. A whole generation found its energy in a continual attempt to "stick it to the man."

A lot going on back then. About most of which, as a child, I remained blissfully unaware. I had bigger fish to fry—mostly things like Captain Kangaroo, Sesame Street, and the Addam's Family—or whether my parents would let me get more than a vanilla cone at the Dairy Queen—because, I mean, that doesn't sound like too much to ask, right?

I remember primarily mundane things about the late ‘60s and early ‘70s—things like the amazing fireworks haul my uncle Jerry would bring to our Fourth of July celebration on my grandparents’ farm or making a ramp from a sheet of plywood set atop a Red Flyer wagon—off of which we would jump our bikes and Big Wheels. I remember hunting for snakes and toads, trying to avoid the wasps and hornets. I remember eating rhubarb pie and drinking RC Cola—all kinds of things.

What I don’t remember, though, is the great upheaval in the country. Somehow, I felt the tension, I guess, but I figured it didn’t have much to do with me. It was a grownup thing. And not just a grownup thing, but a grownup thing that didn’t have much to do with any of the grownups in my life.

Though protests and marches were taking place—I’ve seen the documentaries and read the accounts—I wasn’t raised by people who marched. I didn’t know any protesters. Nobody in my life put on their Birkenstocks, wrapped me in a baby sling, and went off

to tell the world to “make love, not war.” Politics was something on the TV at 6:00, from which I regularly excused myself to play baseball or pound on my little brother; it wasn’t anything I thought had even a lick to do with me.

Consequently, I grew up with a relatively common middle-class contempt for protesters. I don’t know; maybe contempt is too harsh a word. Maybe distaste is better. Whatever it was, I knew that sign-wearers and flag-burners weren’t my people. Folks in my life didn’t “sit in.”

They didn’t take Freedom buses or question the paternal benevolence of law enforcement. We were taught to stand and put our hands over our hearts for the National Anthem, to respect authority, and to assume that the intentions of the people in power were always selfless and true.

The flip side of that deference to authority was the assumption that people who participated in demonstrations were all aimless

hippies, intent on taking stuff they hadn't earned from hardworking folks … like ***my*** people. I had a vague belief that people who marched were troublemakers who, if they hadn't done anything wrong, wouldn't have such a hard time with the otherwise kindly hand of the state.

Whatever else could be said, I was convinced that protest was unnecessarily negative at best, or cynically anarchist at worst.

When I was a kid, I remember riding with my missionary grandpa, who explained just what kind of religious people we were. I said that we were Protestant.

My grandfather, ever the contrarian, said, "I'm not a Protestant."

I said, "What do you mean you're not a Protestant? You're not Catholic."

He said, “I’m not a Protestant because I’m not protesting anything. Protesting is for radicals like Abby Hoffman.”

Because, see, protesting in my tribe was a decidedly negative thing. It always sounded like you were ***against*** something. Protesting against nuclear arms or nuclear energy, or against the College of the Americas, or against the clubbing of baby seals.

Protest meant questioning the authorities, who—we were assured—had only our best interests in mind. It set you athwart the people in power, which—we were assured—was a position no God-fearing American would ever want to find themselves in.

For my grandfather, protest was so unsavory that he didn’t even want to identify himself as a Protestant.

But then I grew up and went to seminary and got a Master’s degree in church history. I spent a lot of time studying the Protestant Reformation. Now, the Protestant Reformation was, in

many respects, a negative protest of some of the excesses of the Catholic Church—many of which the Catholic Church itself worked to reform in what became known as the Counter-Reformation.

But I also learned that Protestant came from the Latin: ***Protestari***, which means to testify publicly on ***behalf*** of something or someone—not just ***against*** something—but to protest ***for*** something.

Protest isn't always about saying "no." Often, it's about saying "yes"—publicly and loudly. Sometimes, it's about testifying—against all appearances to the contrary—that God has called us to love a world we often can't understand, much less abide.

This positive protest is what Jesus finds himself embroiled in in our text this morning. He's out and about on the Sabbath, doing what Jesus and his disciples typically do on the Sabbath, I imagine. The hungry disciples appear to violate the Sabbath. As

they’re passing through a field, they knock over some stalks, and they start to gather the heads of grain they’ve dislodged.

Later, Jesus is in the synagogue with all eyes still on him when he tells a man with a withered hand to come forward. Jesus turns to his critics and asks, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

With no answer forthcoming, Jesus tells the man to stretch out his hand—and the text says, “It was restored.”

The Pharisees, who, because of passages like this, have an awful reputation as the prune-faced chaperones at life’s prom, ask Jesus why his disciples are breaking Sabbath law. Does he not realize that you’re not supposed to harvest grain or heal on the Sabbath?

But we need to be fair to the Pharisees. Keeping the sabbath holy—the fourth commandment—isn’t just about not cutting the

grass on the Lord's Day. That is to say, the Sabbath wasn't just one more rule to trip up the unaware in a religious game of "gotcha!"

No, the Sabbath was a day of commanded rest—the purpose of which was not to keep a boot on the ambitions of over-eager entrepreneurs but to keep the wealthy from working the peasants to death. It was the first liberal occupational safety policy—a kind of ancient Near-Eastern OSHA requirement. If it weren't for the Sabbath, ancient Palestinian laborers would never have a day of rest.

So, while the Pharisees are in a position to keep an eye on a commandment meant to look out for the poor and the powerless, they come off looking pretty heartless.

Let me be quick to say that I don't want to play into the caricature of the Pharisees as overweening fussbudgets, but obviously, Mark is under the impression that Jesus has a problem

with the Pharisaic interpretation of the Sabbath. Though the Pharisees know as well as anybody that acts of mercy are permitted on the Sabbath, they seem to have forgotten that the very nature of the Sabbath—the reason for its existence—is about ***mercy and justice***.

At the heart of the Sabbath is God's compassion for the people whom those in power are always threatening to trample.

All of that is a pretty standard take on this passage from Mark. I haven't broken any new ground by pointing out that Jesus seeks to reorient the people's relationship to sabbath rest as primarily concerned with watching out for those who have a difficult time watching out for themselves.

But what really sticks out to me in this passage is seeing the way Jesus protests. As I've said, Jesus protests all understandings of the Sabbath that view it as anything but a way to lighten the load on the working poor. So, in that sense, it's a positive protest.

What strikes me, though, is the way Jesus chooses to make his point. In both cases—the disciples gleaning in the field and the man with a withered hand in the synagogue—Jesus could have chosen to do those things in a more private manner.

Obviously, his critics were present, waiting for him to do something they could be outraged by. So, the smart thing would have been to tell his disciples to just keep their hands to themselves and let the grain lay. He could have told the man with the withered hand to meet him out back after everybody had already left.

He could have done what he did privately. But he didn't. He chose to make a ruckus right out in front of God and everyone.

Protestari: To testify ***publicly*** on behalf of something or someone.

In other words, Jesus assessed the situation and decided that the injustice was great enough for him to make his point in public.

You know what we call that in American democracy?

Civil disobedience. Jesus disrupts the status quo on purpose.

And how do we know that Jesus' foray into political activism had its intended effect? Because after it was done, Mark tells us that "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."

Now, you might be saying to yourself, "Ok, fine. So, he made his statement about the purpose of the Sabbath publicly. So what?"

But the thing we need to ask ourselves is, "Why?" Why did Jesus risk the deadly wrath of the religious authorities when he could just as easily have avoided conflict? I mean, we're only 79 verses

into the Gospel of Mark, and the people in power are already trying to figure out how to kill him.

So why does Jesus publicly protest in a way that is most likely to make his opponents want to destroy him? Why not just do his good work without making waves?

Do you recognize those questions? Those are the kinds of questions I learned as a middle-class suburban kid to ask of protesters when they did something outrageous. Those are the kinds of questions I might have asked of Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King: "Why protest in such a public and controversial way?"

Or Black Lives Matter: "Why not just protest in a less confrontational way?"

Or the Poor People's Campaign: "Is it necessary to be so disruptive?"

Or the Parkland students: “Can’t you just grieve without getting all political?”

But the problem with those questions is that they assume that everything is basically all right and that what is needed isn’t a radical dismantling of an unjust system but a few cosmetic tweaks.

Because if we take seriously the public testimony of the marginalized and the vulnerable, we have to come to terms with the fact that we’ve participated in systems that, by their very nature, protect the interests of the powerful at the expense of the powerless. In other words, we’re not just innocent bystanders to all this agitation; in some way, we’re part of the reason these protests are necessary.

It is the irony of human history that the people in charge always feel it’s their prerogative to set down the rules for what qualifies

as “appropriate forms of protest.” They’re never entirely clear about what “appropriate protest” might be—just that, whatever it is, it wouldn’t be nearly as loud and public and would make us all much more comfortable with the world we usually take for granted.

But protest, by its very nature, is transgressive. It operates under the assumption that power needs to be ***disrupted*** for change to occur. In the famous words of Dr. Martin Luther King, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed.”

But it’s important to remember that Jesus’ protest, his public testimony, isn’t just a “no” to the folks in power; it’s a resounding “yes” to people who need the powers and principalities to work for the vulnerable—not against them.

Jesus’ ministry is about laying out for us a vision of what God desires for ***all*** humanity, not just those who believe they can afford to look the other way at injustice.

Because if Jesus is anything like right, none of us can afford to look the other way, to keep things quiet and private when some are hurting.

Those people need to hear our “Yes!” to them.

Out loud. And in public.

—Amen.