My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

The dispute over the Sabbath is representative of the whole purpose and meaning of the law in general. They detail what it means to focus on the exactitude of the letter and to miss the spirit of the law entirely. The law, as the pharisees understood it, was the way the people showed their faith to God. The psalms, many scripture passages, and many heroes of the Bible from Moses to Samuel to David and up until Jesus’ time were celebrated by following God’s commandments.

There were consequences to not following God’s law, weren’t there? The people, having fled Egypt, spent years in the wilderness because they didn’t do it. David followed his own path in breaking a couple of commandments regarding Bathsheba, and it cost him and the people he ruled dearly. Jeremiah warned that not following God’s law would result in Jerusalem being captured and destroyed. If you’re interested in the detailed descriptions of those laws, broken, and consequences, I’ll invite you to look them up for yourself later today. Read the Bible.

There are folks who really enjoy frameworks. Rules are rules, and they’re there for a reason. Don’t touch the hot stove. Don’t shoot over the horizon or at anything you don’t intend to kill. Don’t drink and drive. Don’t resort to physical violence. These are easy to follow. When it comes to God, we don’t need to question those motives. If that is the case, the Pharisees’ words, motives, and actions are compelling depictions of what happens when someone is so bent on keeping the particularity of the law that they are willing to overlook the sheer joy of a man’s withered hand being restored.

How easy it would be if life were organized like that. There are the rules are made to be followed folks, the rules are made to be broken folks, and a broad swath in between who understand what Jesus was doing that day with his disciples: it’s bigger than that.

It’s notable that in the Gospels that disciples didn’t fast according to the Pharisees’ schedule. When they got hungry, they ate. When they got thirsty, they drank, when they were tired, they slept. It was an in-the-moment existence that had them gleaning the fields that Saturday. They were attentive to what Jesus was doing and giving at all times, to his teachings and healings as they unfolded. Jesus, in his divinity, knew when to give God’s word, grace, and healing. When he healed the man with the withered hand, what do we notice about that story?

It's one of the only instances in the Gospels where Jesus does what Jesus does without prompt. He enters the synagogue! He’s at church. The man with the withered hand is there. He’s not lowered down through the roof, he’s not pulling at Jesus’ cloak, he’s not crying out “Jesus of Nazareth, have mercy on me!” The man doesn’t ask to be healed. And yet, Jesus sees the need. He’s healed.

Jesus asks everyone in the room a simple question: is it lawful to do good or evil on the Sabbath? Neither the rule-breakers, the rule followers, nor the rest of them would answer. THAT’s what riles God up the most, when we refuse to ask ourselves the question that God asks each of us every day. Should we do good or evil? And if it’s on the day God has asked that we set aside to think about, praise, and follow God, is that allowed?

We retreat into our first-grade selves, just as these folks in the synagogue did. We don’t want to look foolish by giving the wrong answer. We don’t want to disappoint by not meeting expectations. We certainly don’t want to be the ones who cause an argument between the ones who guide our lives and who have known and studied these things. But we also want to know before we leave church.

The question we want for our faith is: how do we know if what we’re staring at in any particular situation, or with any particular person and their actions, are the hot-stove moments? What are those things that are most vital to our faith, that if we remain silent could be the most damaging to our faith? Time marches us ever forward, and we cannot go back, sometimes those events are past. We rebuked when we should have reconciled. We tried giving wisdom when none was needed or asked for. We prevented someone from gleaning the fields of faith by telling them what we want, what they should do, and fed our own soul at their expense.

Where do we sit in the synagogue of our lives? Are we there for silent contemplation and content to let events happen around us? Are we noticing what is holy, and what is not? Do we see the ones who ask the hard questions, who challenge us to see past our hard and fast rules, our patterns which no longer satisfy our hunger? Do we understand that there are those among us who have the withered hand, but who come and are healed? Do we see and celebrate the healing that is going on in our midst, or are we all too certain that the acts and deeds we hear and witness need to be stopped in their tracks, and those responsible exiled or killed?

The Pharisees and scribes know what’s good for their people, right? Who is God to come among them and upset their lists of what is good and evil, lawful and not?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Our scripture today gives compelling depictions of why “the law” could either be a life-giving source of joy and instruction or a life-demeaning source of judgment and an onerous burden. Our story leaves many gaps in between the events and the reaction of the crowds. We ask many questions and the answer the Bible gives is just this: we don’t know.

But for my two cents, that’s a cop-out. We do know. There is always a person with a withered hand in our midst, looking at us, one of us, in need of healing and we have not these many, many years. How have we not seen? How have we overlooked? Have we spoken to them, acknowledged them, inquired after them, wondered how they’re doing, or do we go about our own business as if they have no hope for healing at all?

It’s the Sabbath. There are people in need right here, right now. They won’t ask you or God for healing, just like the man with the withered hand, but to look the other way again this week begs the question: Is it lawful to do good or evil? Our silence is indeed deafening, isn’t it? Help us, O Lord, to respond with grace this day, thanks be to God,

Amen.