

Our stories from Mark's Gospel contrast the spirit of the law with the letter of the law. The Pharisees upheld a very strict interpretation of the Laws of Moses. For the Pharisees, no work on the Sabbath meant exactly that – no work on the Sabbath, with work defined very narrowly. If we think about the two Great Commandments – to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself – we could infer that the Pharisees had become so focussed on loving God by upholding the Mosaic laws that they seemed to have forgotten about loving their neighbours. In the second story, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, the day of rest when work is forbidden (#4 of the Ten Commandments). The Pharisees judged healing to be an act of work – the letter of the law. Jesus pointed to the spirit of the law by asking, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath?” I imagine that none of us here today has any difficulty with Jesus' answer. Actually, the Pharisees were being exceptionally prickly. Jewish people are allowed to break the Sabbath rules in exceptional circumstances, for example, to save a human life or that of an animal – e.g., to pull out a sheep that has fallen into a ditch. This is like the sensitivity that Islam shows by exempting children, pregnant women, and those who are ill from the obligatory dawn-to-dusk fast during Ramadan.

Mark's story about the man with the withered hand also illustrates the idea of choosing a harsh or heartless option versus a compassionate or merciful one. The Pharisees took the harsh option. They invoked the rules – no work on the Sabbath; if you want to be healed, come back tomorrow. Jesus took the merciful option – it is better to do good than to do harm. Another instance of Jesus taking the compassionate course was when a woman was caught in a situation of adultery. The rules (Leviticus 20:10) said that she should be stoned to death. Jesus invited anyone without sin to throw the first stone; when nobody did so, he took the merciful route and simply told her not to sin again.

Let's not imagine that we Anglicans never show the Pharisees' attitudes. Although it's not a rule, many churches only allow clergy and altar guild members into the “sanctuary” area around the altar. That infers that you have to be specially holy in order to approach the altar. I argue something quite different. It isn't the physical space around the altar that is specially holy; what is holy is what we do there on Sunday mornings to consecrate the bread and wine as the Body and Blood of Christ. Moreover, to suggest that only certain people should be allowed in that area suggests that other members of the parish are somehow unworthy or inferior – exactly the opposite of the inclusive approach that Jesus took.

Something that I have never seen commented upon about the Pharisees is that they were a fortunate class of people in Jewish society. In an age and society of poverty and illiteracy, these men were well educated and well esteemed as a result. It is all too easy for us also to forget our own advantages in life. Most of us were born into a stable and peaceful society where education and health care were available, and were raised by two parents. We did not create these advantages ourselves. They just happened to us. We probably, none of us, like that ugly expression, “Check your privilege” or worse, “Check your white privilege” because we did not create our good luck. Nevertheless, we have enjoyed good luck. These ideas are in my mind because of two broadcasts that I experienced last Sunday.

The first of them was a segment of the CBC radio program *The Sunday Edition*, in which Michael Enright interviewed Robert Frank, who is a professor at Cornell University and the author of a book entitled, *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy*. Frank's main point was to

question the firmly held belief by many successful people that they got where they are through hard work and talent, and therefore they deserve everything that's come to them.

Frank described an experiment in which students were asked to think of an occasion when something good had happened to them. One group was also asked to think of three things that they had done to bring the good thing about (talent); another group was asked to consider three things that had helped that thing happen that they had nothing to do with (luck); a final group was asked only to think of a good event in their lives. All the students were given a sum of money for participating in the study and asked if they would like to give some of it away to charity. The first group gave the least away. As I listened, I was reminded of a passage from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 8. "When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God. Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth." Those words were written three thousand years ago, so I guess that human nature hasn't changed much.

The second broadcast was a TVO documentary about the difficulties that many Victorian era orphan boys from London England experienced when they were sent to Canada. These boys had been rescued by organizations such as Dr Barnado's Homes and immigrated to Canada as teenagers. Their experiences differed enormously because of sheer luck. Some were sent to homes where they were treated as family; others arrived at homes or farms where they were used as indentured slave labour. The "luck of the draw" determined their happiness and their later success as adults in Canadian society.

Thinking about my own life, I can recall many situations in which good fortune played an important role. Although I did well academically, I owe a lot to mentors both in high school and to the professor who became my advisor in graduate school. My success in being appointed to the University of Guelph involved the chance that the airlines were on strike when I was asked to come for interview, and it made an excellent impression on the then chair of the Chemistry Department that I was prepared to take a two-day cross country train ride from Edmonton to be available for interview the next Monday. As a minister, people have told me that they appreciate the way that I officiate at funerals, but that ability is due to the late Steve Witcher, my mentor at St James' Fergus, where I was an intern and, later, a curate. Any of these events could have happened differently, and I would not be talking to you today.

Both Jesus and the Old Testament prophets repeatedly ask us to consider the less fortunate in society – what the prophets called the widows and orphans. So I ask each of us to always keep in mind the fact that we call them "the less fortunate" is precisely because of the role of luck as the complement to hard work and talent. The man with the withered hand presumably had his disability from birth. He would have had difficulty finding work; he would therefore have been poor as well as disabled. Jesus healed him. The Pharisees criticized Jesus because they could not look past the letter of the Law of Moses nor remember their own good fortune in being born whole.

There is a provincial election this week. As Christians, we have a difficult task to decide how to cast our votes so as to bring Ontario into a prosperous future for everyone. The parties have very different approaches as to how to achieve this. Among the considerations is which approach they propose is most likely to be fairest for all, and least dependent on the luck of the draw.