Today we step into the period of the church year know as *ordinary time.* While it is true that there aren’t really any special days from now until Christ the King Sunday, we don’t call *ordinary time* “ordinary” for that reason. “Ordinary” in this case doesn’t mean “plain” or “not distinctive” but rather comes from the word “ordinal” and simply means “counted time”. We count the weeks from the end of the season of Easter until the beginning of Advent with only a few special days to break up the flow. Ordinary, or counted time can be thought of as a time to ruminate on the seasons that have take up the previous 6 months—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Easter—as well as open ourselves to the larger story of the people of God in general and the ministry of Jesus Christ in particular. Rather than focusing on the drama of the birth narrative or the journey to Jerusalem and the passion narrative, we can work our way through the next 6 months thoroughly exploring the ministry of Jesus or the development of God’s people from the time of the Judges to the time of the kings and beyond. The focus this summer is on Jesus’ Galilean ministry of Jesus and his time spent in Jerusalem, as told by Mark and John, or we can look at the development of the people of God under Samuel, David and Solomon and the lead up to the Babylonian exile. Or we can do a bit of both, and with about 6 months ahead of us I think we have plenty of time to do whatever we like!

Today and for the next few weeks we’re going to look at the Galilean ministry of Jesus. Now, as you have probably noticed, the lectionary isn’t a continuous reading of scripture passages. In other words, we don’t start out at Chapter 1 verse 1 and read each verse until we get to the end of whichever book we’re looking at. But I think it’s important as we move through this part of Mark to read what’s going on between lectionary passages, to keep in the flow of the story. So what I’m going to suggest to you is that you read and study the missing pieces during the week between Sundays. I tell you what the missing piece is for the week so that you’ll know what to study. (Also note that I’m going to be out of town the next two Sundays—which doesn’t mean you shouldn’t come to church, in fact, it’s a good chance to hear someone besides me preach!) So between now and next Sunday what you’ll need to read and ponder is Mark 7-19. I didn’t get that into the bulletin, so write it down and take it home and sometime this week take some time to read and reflect on what it says and how it fits with where we are today.

Today as we meet Jesus and his disciples it is the Sabbath; in fact these stories probably came from two different Sabbaths, and they are the last two of a series of 5 stories in Mark about the beginning of Jesus ministry in Galilee. The first three stories include Jesus healing a paralytic amidst crowds of people who were trying to see him; Jesus calling a tax collector as a disciple and then eating at his house (with all sorts of other disreputable people), and Jesus being quizzed by the Pharisees about why his disciples didn’t fast as John’s disciples and the Pharisees were doing. All three times Jesus raises the eyebrows of the Pharisees—we can see that Jesus wasted no time in shaking things up! This is only chapter two, after all!

And here we are on the Sabbath and Jesus and the Pharisees clash again. It seems that as the disciples were “making a way” through a field of grain some of them plucked a few grains to eat. Perhaps they were hungry—being on the move all the time probably burned a lot of calories!—or maybe they were just absent-mindedly picking grain to munch on as they went along, as you might chew on a hay stalk or pick a flower as you’re walking through a field or woods.

Somehow the Pharisees caught wind of this; were they following this raggedy band of guys around to see what they’d do? Did they hear about it from someone else who had been there? However they came to know about this plucking and eating of grain they came to Jesus to berate him about it. Later, on another Sabbath Jesus brings to the center of the synagogue a man with a withered hand and instigates a discussion about what is proper to do on the Sabbath. Two Sabbath stories, two more incidents with Jesus and Pharisees at odds. What’s going on here?

We can’t be too hard on the Pharisees. After all, they were under a tremendous amount of pressure themselves trying to hold together a community living under foreign rule—foreign rule that wasn’t exactly friendly to their religious beliefs. They were forced to pay taxes to the emperor even if they wouldn’t call him a god, and the scope of religious practice was narrowed to a large degree. So the laws they were able to keep they emphasized to a severe degree.

But that was the problem. The pressure the Pharisees were under to keep true to their religion actually knocked it *out* of true. It’s similar to the way severe pressures over time can cause rocks to bend and fold, the pressure on the religion at that time caused it to become out of line with God’s intention.

You see, God didn’t institute laws to make it hard on the people of God. In fact, God gave the law to the people to make it easier for them to get along. That’s what Jesus means when he says that the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath; the Sabbath, as one of the first laws of God given to the people, was there *for the benefit* of humanity, to offer rest to the weary. It wasn’t there to give the people something they had to live up to or work hard at in order to fulfill. But the Pharisees were working so hard to keep the religion going that they perhaps didn’t notice that they were excluding the very people who most needed the rest—the poor, who often had to make hard choices about whether to pay taxes to Ceasar or to the temple and then might not have enough left to feed their children. Insisting on strict adherence to the Sabbath law only made things harder for people who already had it hard enough.

It was the same with the man who had a withered or crippled hand. Now, this man wasn’t *dying* and so there was no real urgency for him to be healed; presumably his hand had been that way for a while. The point was his quality of life. If the Sabbath is made for human rest and healing, what better day than the Sabbath for Jesus to heal this man? Why wait?

The other issue here is the question of authority. The Pharisees are hot with righteous indignation: what right does this ruffian have to question the Sabbath laws? What right does he have to change things? The answer is, again, in this statement: the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath, so the son of Man (of humanity) is Lord also of the Sabbath.

But, like so many situations that Jesus finds himself in, they just don’t get it. Even when a man is made whole, restored to the completeness of God’s good creative action, the Pharisees are still stuck on the idea that obedience to the rules is more important.

Over the past several decades the church has seen pretty steep declines in membership and participation. And when I say the church, I don’t just mean our church or the Presbyterian church but Christian churches in general are losing members faster than they’re gaining them. And while church isn’t a numbers game, what this decline implies is that church just isn’t as important to people as it used to be and if we don’t pay attention to what’s going on then one day there may be no church to worry about.

But perhaps we have a clue here. What is there about religious culture that isn’t interesting or significant to the lives of people today? What are we doing to make the practice of religion difficult, where are we putting up roadblocks, where are we so insistent on our own way of doing things that either those outside of the church are just turned off? Or even worse: are our rules and traditions making it too hard for those outside the church, those who are poor, who are working multiple jobs, who have to make hard choices between feeding their children and paying the rent or buying their meds. Do we make it too hard to fit in by the way we dress for church or too hard to attend because of the time of our service?

At the end of the day, we have a lot of wonderful things to offer people all around us: we have comfort to give those who are hurting, we have strength to give those who are struggling. We have love to give to the friendless and hope to share with the desperate. We have the ability to be the hands, feet and heart of God in the world by following the way of Christ and offering these things they way he offered them—openly, generously, only thinking of their benefit, their wholeness, and not himself. So we can ask ourselves, what are we holding onto, what is keeping us from connecting with the world in a way that is meaningful and helpful to them? And what are we going to do about that? Because we can’t just wait around to see what happens—it is our call as Christians to gather in everyone we can.

We can see that there is urgency in Jesus’ ministry from the very beginning; and we know that the rules and traditions are there to make things better for us and those around us, not to make it harder; so let us examine ourselves and our practices, looking for ways to bring the generous, caring love of Jesus to each other, our community, and the world.