



“Breaking Things”
Scripture – Mark 3:20-27, 31-35
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, June 10, 2018

Who does not recognize Galileo as a brilliant scientist? But in his day, he was framed as an agitator and opponent of the Church. When Galileo declared that Copernicus was correct – the earth is not the center of the universe; the sun does not revolve around the earth, but rather the earth revolves around the sun – the ruling authorities attempted to crush him. The Church forced him to recant his views and threw him into prison. Galileo’s belief broke so severely with conventional thought that the authorities – in his case, the Roman Catholic Church – branded him a heretic and yanked him from society.

Galileo was not simply declaring a scientific breakthrough that reshaped people’s understanding of the universe. He was putting forward an idea that challenged conventional thinking and the position of the church. Religious leaders knew that Galileo’s conclusion would shake people’s confidence in ecclesiastical authority. So, rather than embracing this scientific breakthrough as a better understanding of God’s creation, they treated him as a threat to the teachings of the church.

When individuals first opposed slavery, they were ridiculed, ostracized, and sometimes beaten. They were treated harshly because they were seen as a threat to the economy and, more significantly, a threat to the worldview that people of color were less than fully human.

When individuals peacefully protested for women’s rights and declared that women ought to have the opportunity to vote, they too, evoked the wrath of the ruling authorities who attempted to silence them. Those who advocated for women’s rights were considered a threat to the social order. Men who saw women’s rights as a challenge to their hold on power, stoked fear in the masses that chaos would ensue if the structures and customs of society were revamped.

This morning’s awkward passage of scripture indicates that Jesus experienced something similar. The two prominent defenders of the social order – the community of faith and the family – viewed Jesus as a threat, so they attempted to undermine him by declaring him mad.

Shortly after he began his ministry, Jesus became a controversial figure because he believed it was his duty to break things. In order to be true to God – not true to himself, not true to his family, not true to the norms of his community, not even true to the traditions of his religion – Jesus believed it was his duty to break things. He broke rules, he broke customs, and he broke social conventions.

In the early pages of Mark's gospel, we read that Jesus healed many people. One healing was on the Sabbath. The religious authorities saw this as a clear violation of the fourth commandment to do no work on the Sabbath. So, very early in his ministry, Jesus was branded a heretic. The religious authorities were furious with him and you can imagine how embarrassed his parents were. Jesus went outside the bounds of tradition and brought shame on his family.

I can picture Mary and Joseph asking Jesus to come into the living room for a family talk. Did your parents ever do that to you when they wanted to set you straight?

From my own experience of being told to "step into the living room," I can imagine how Jesus felt. More importantly, I can see Mary trying to reason with Jesus. "Son, the man you healed has been ill for ages. Why couldn't you wait one day to heal him? Did you really have to do it on the Sabbath?"

And I can hear Jesus replying, "Yes, I had to heal him on the Sabbath. That was the whole point."

Jesus had to break the law of abstaining from work on the Sabbath to drive home the point that *people are more important than rules*. He had to break the religious stipulation of not working on the Sabbath because people had forgotten the intention of the commandment.

In the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, we read that the purpose of not working on the Sabbath is to give everyone a day of rest – you, your children, your workers, your slaves, even the animals need a day of rest. The commandment was not an arbitrary rule to be followed for its own sake, but to enhance the health of living creatures.

Jesus could have healed the man on a Wednesday and avoided the controversy. However, he did it to *prompt* the controversy. He did it to take a bold stand and to declare that God values each human being.

Healing on the Sabbath was not the only thing Jesus did to provoke controversy. He touched a leper to heal him. According to religious law, touching a leper made Jesus unclean. To heal another person, Jesus told the man his sins were forgiven. The religious authorities went berserk and called it blasphemy because they believed only God could forgive sins.

As our passage unfolds, his actions so upset the status quo that he was accused of being out of his mind.

One of the ways that authorities seek to silence someone whose ideas and actions are threatening, is to declare the person insane. The tactic not only undermines the idea and discredits the person who voices it, but it also puts everyone else on notice that if they endorse such an opinion, they risk being ostracized or worse.

Our passage states that when the family of Jesus got wind that he was stirring up controversy, they went out to muzzle him. Surely their intentions were good. They did not want the authorities to come down heavy on him and they were trying to protect the family from being shamed or banished from the community.

But before the family could restrain Jesus and smother the controversy, religious authorities from Jerusalem appear on the scene. Someone has decided to send in the big guns to smear Jesus. The scribes do not accuse Jesus of being insane. They pull out a more damning indictment. They denounce him as an agent of the devil, saying that it is the prince of demons who gives Jesus power to cast out demons.

Jesus fires back with a parable, saying, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. No one can enter a strong

man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered."

The parable is a bit opaque, but Jesus is declaring that he is surely not an agent of the devil. He is an enemy of the prince of darkness. He is totally committed to God; therefore he is intent on doing battle with evil. That is required if he is to be successful in spreading the kingdom of God.

That brings us to the final verses of the passage which sound unreasonably harsh. In first century Judaism, the family was extremely tight knit. Yet Jesus seems to count them for little when someone says, "Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you." Jesus replies, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then, glancing at those who are sitting with him, he says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

His words are intended to shock us, to offend us, and to force us to make a decision. Jesus wants to be clear that being faithful to God can put you at odds with others. Faith can deepen your bonds with others, but it can also put you at odds not only with strangers and people who have different customs, but your friends and even your family. If you are in harmony with God, you may find yourself clashing with the laws of the government, the popular ideas of society, the opinions of your friends, and the norms of your family.

Sometimes God calls us to defy the status quo, to run the risk of breaking with tradition, and to take a stand that is not popular.

If the status quo serves you well, it is very tempting to shave off the rough edges of Jesus and prop him up as an advocate of the current state of affairs. It is also very tempting to imagine a seamless connection between our opinions and the teachings of Jesus.

Fitting in with others and gaining their approval exert hefty pulls on us. We would much rather feel secure in our relationships than risk being sidelined. We worry about taking too bold of a stand on an issue that is not popular, so we often find ourselves whispering rather than speaking up. However, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, "Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

In his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergy would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist...But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist? 'Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, and pray for those that spitefully use you. Was not Amos an extremist for justice? 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.' Was not Martin Luther an extremist – 'Here I stand; I can do no other so help me God.' Was not John Bunyan an extremist? 'I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.' Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist? 'This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.' So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremist we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?"

God wants to know if we are courageous enough to try to break some things – like racism and violence and homophobia and inequality and disregard for God's creation. Will we be extremists for the status quo, or will we be extremists for the kingdom of God?

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Holy God – Who stretched out the heavens like a curtain, and set stars in a night-sky tapestry;
Who knit us together in our mothers' wombs, and enfolds us with a parent's tender care –

You are Lord of the cosmos, and Shepherd of our souls. The whole universe rests in your embrace, but still you care for each of us ... claiming us in the waters of baptism, nourishing us at the family table, gathering us into the community of Christ.

You are faithful to us in every age, O God. In this season of transition, as spring blossoms into summer, we reflect on the passage of time and celebrate the milestones that mark our journeys. We rejoice with our graduates, and pray for your guidance as they embark on new adventures – whether that be further study, a new career, volunteer service, or a season of discernment. Thank you, God, for the teachers, counsellors, administrators, mentors, and loved ones who have encouraged, nurtured, and challenged them; may they always know the gift they have been to these students, and seek opportunities to bless the lives of others. Thank you, God, for chances to discover, to imagine, to problem solve, and to grow; may these graduates use the skills and insight they've gained to glorify you and further your kingdom. And thank you, God, for your abiding presence in *all* our lives; may we seek your guidance and grace as we journey onward with you.

We remember — Loving God — those for whom this season of life has brought pain, anxiety or turmoil. Our hearts are heavy as we hear of widespread devastation in Guatemala, and we pray for the people left to search, left to grieve, left to seek signs of new life rising from the ashes. Be with those who have responded to the suffering wrought by Fuego, especially our mission partners at CEDEPCA, and inspire the global community to listen to the needs of this hurting nation and act with compassion and generosity.

As we – your church – journey forward with you, empower us to join in your healing work, both near and far. Fill us, we pray, with passion for your Word and courage to heed your call, and sustain us for service with love that endures and hope that uplifts. Pour out your Spirit upon us, O God. Inspire us, challenge us, empower us, that we might go forth with renewed conviction, ready to participate in your ministry of justice, reconciliation, and peace.

We lift this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, and join our voices as one to offer the words he taught us: **Our Father ...**