

TO SOFTEN A HEART

By Scott Grant

The musical *Fiddler on the Roof* features Tevye, a Russian Jew who struggles to keep his world together in a small village. More than anything, “tradition” keeps it together. Tevye tells the audience, “Here in Anatevka, we have traditions for everything. How to sleep. How to eat. How to work. How to wear clothes.” Concerning one particular tradition, he says, “You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I’ll tell you. I don’t know. But it’s a tradition. And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.” Later, Tevye adds, “Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.”¹

We have our traditions: our positions and our practices. They help us make our way through life while making sense of it. Our approaches are so helpful, in fact, that their importance to us can often overshadow our original reason for employing them. Any tradition, even one that’s based on the scriptures, can mask a hard heart. In Mark 2:23-3:6, Jesus encounters some folks whose approach to life was apparently biblical but whose hearts were resistant to God. Mark’s story therefore helps us recognize hardness in our hearts. It can also, if we let it, soften such hardness.

Mark 2:23-3:6:

And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. The Pharisees were saying to Him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?” Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent. After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.²

Lord of the Sabbath

For many first-century Jews, the Sabbath was not simply a day of rest; it was intertwined with their national identity and hopes. God gave it to Israel after he liberated

it from Egypt. For some, keeping the Sabbath meant that you were saying, “We are God’s people.” “It was a badge of Jewishness for people who’d been persecuted and killed simply for being Jews,” writes scholar N.T. Wright.³ When Jews kept the Sabbath, they remembered God’s work in creating the world and in creating them as a people, and they anticipated God’s future work in liberating them from their enemies once again.

Whether one kept the Sabbath or not—and how one kept it—was no small matter in Jesus’ day. For many, Sabbath practices determined whose side you were on, whether you accepted Roman occupation or whether you opposed it. For Pharisees, a popular pressure group, keeping the Sabbath according to their rulings was a sign of loyalty—to God, to Israel, and to national hopes for liberation. They were watchful for the emergence of movements that ignored or trivialized the Sabbath and thereby posed a threat to their hopes for the coming kingdom of God, which for them constituted liberation from Rome.

For the Pharisees, picking heads of grain constituted a violation of the Sabbath. They could invoke Exodus 34:21: “You shall work six days, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during plowing time and harvest you shall rest.” They want to know why Jesus, as a preacher of the kingdom of God, is allowing his disciples to violate the Sabbath.

Jesus answers by telling a story about David, Israel’s prototypical king, from 1 Samuel 21:1-6.⁴ After being privately anointed by the prophet Samuel, David was running from Saul, who was still ruling in Israel. Strictly speaking, David and his men broke the law by eating bread that was set aside for use in the tabernacle and for consumption by the priests. God, however, didn’t reprimand David. As the presumptive king, David had the authority to override the law, especially inasmuch as the then-king was seeking to kill him. If, strictly speaking, the Pharisees could claim that Jesus broke the Sabbath law, he claims that he has the authority to override it. Jesus claims the right to pick grain on the Sabbath, the holy day, just as David claimed the right to eat bread from the holy place, the house of God. Jesus sees himself as the presumptive king of Israel, anointed by John the Baptist but not yet enthroned (Mark 1:9-11).

The Pharisees, when they questioned Jesus about his disciples’ Sabbath practices, were in actuality questioning his loyalty to the kingdom of God. Jesus, by invoking the David story, turns the tables on them. The question is not whether Jesus is with the Pharisees or against the Pharisees; the question is whether they are with him or against him. If he has the authority to override the law, then he, like David, is the presumptive king of Israel, and the Pharisees, like Saul and his men, are the ones who are disloyal to the kingdom of God.

Jesus reminds the Pharisees that the Sabbath was God’s gift to his people so that they could rest from their work one day a week and remember him: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” The Pharisees, however, have hijacked the Sabbath by making it not so much a day of rest but a badge of national loyalty. In their view, men and women should serve the Sabbath—specifically, the Pharisees’ understanding of it. Such a view excludes men and women who don’t share their view—men and women for whom the Sabbath was made. The Pharisees have dehumanized the Sabbath.

The Pharisees have set themselves up as authorities over the Sabbath. On the other hand, Jesus, as the Son of Man, claims that he is in authority over the Sabbath. Therefore, he has the right to interpret it and even reinterpret it in order to rescue it.⁵ Jesus last employed the title Son of Man when claiming for himself the authority to

forgive sins, the prerogative of the temple (Mark 2:1-12). Jesus sees himself as being in authority over the temple and the Sabbath, holy space and holy time.

Attachment to positions and practices

If Jesus and the authors of the New Testament redefine the Sabbath, they do so in a way that emphasizes the spirit of the law. The Sabbath remains God's gift to us. If it seems as if the world would fall apart if we didn't keep our noses to the grindstone, God tells us to take a break and connect with an eternal perspective. However you observe the Sabbath, observe it. Take a break from your labors on a frequent basis. Remember God's work in creation and redemption, and look forward to the re-creation. It will be good for your soul.

Sabbath observance in church circles today is generally not as politically charged as it was in the Jewish circles of Jesus' day. True, some places and traditions emphasize Sabbath observance so that even minor variations from prescribed views expose the violator to potential persecution. Nevertheless, most of us in our part of the world keep our Sabbath views separate from our identity and hopes. The story of Jesus and the Pharisees, however, demonstrates how easy it is for us to intertwine our positions and practices with our identity and hopes. It tells us how easy it is for us to debunk something because it threatens our narrowly defined categories. It warns us against sizing up people and movements—and dismissing them as disloyal to the cause of Christ—based on their views on certain issues. We are all vulnerable to forming unhealthy attachments to ecclesiastical forms, theological systems, spiritual disciplines, and political views.

We arrive at certain positions and practices and then expect Jesus to bless them. In one way or another, we demand that he submit to our agenda. Jesus, however, doesn't submit to our agendas, thank God. Instead, he asks us to submit to his agenda, which serves the purposes of God both for our lives and for the world. His agenda, in fact, may mean that others refuse to submit to our agenda.

It is possible for one's positions and practices to be biblical in form but non-biblical in substance. It is possible to honor the letter of the law while violating its spirit. If you start with the letter of the law and not the spirit, you can always find a loophole in the letter that enables you to violate the spirit. It is possible to hijack biblical positions and practices by making them badges of loyalty, just as the Pharisees hijacked the Sabbath. When we treat our positions and practices in such ways, we force others to adopt our views or we dismiss them as unenlightened. We come off as opinionated in a rigid way.

Sadly, it is possible to become so attached to one's positions and practices that you forget why you adopted them in the first place. In such cases, our positions and practices cease leading us to Jesus and start protecting us from Jesus. The Pharisees were so focused on Sabbath observance that they didn't recognize the Lord of the Sabbath when he showed up.

The ecclesiastical tradition in this church values both the authority and teaching of the scriptures—rightly, in my view. We are, however, not invulnerable to developing unhealthy attachments to the scriptures, to our interpretation of the scriptures, and to our method of studying and teaching the scriptures. Pride crouches at the door of every heart, ready to corrupt even the purest of intentions. When we open the door for pride to enter,

we also open it for grace to exit. We then assume that little or nothing is to be gained by considering the merits of other traditions. We expect God to bless us because we're doing the scriptures "the right way"—and we're resentful when he doesn't. We forget why we adopted our approach to the scriptures in the first place. We start out studying the scriptures in order to look for Jesus, but we end up hiding from him, falling back on familiar positions that keep him at arm's length. Heaven help us if Jesus really showed up to shake up our world! We study the scriptures, but we fail to recognize the Lord of the scriptures. Jesus told some of his contemporaries, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (John 5:39-40).

In the course of the last 17 years, I have read through the entire Bible more than five times by following a daily schedule. It has served me well. Sometimes, the Lord has spoken to me in personal ways through the readings. Such occurrences were rare, however. Mostly, I felt that I was building on my ability to understand and communicate the scriptures. I didn't need something in a passage to knock me off my chair to benefit from it. Sometimes, the schedule felt like a delight. Other times, it felt like a discipline. But in the last few years, it felt more like a discipline than a delight. So recently, I decided to take a break. I still think daily Bible reading is valuable, and I recommend it. I felt free to let go of the schedule, though, in part because I think I'm getting enough of the Bible as I study and teach it.

Jesus is not only Lord of the Sabbath and Lord of the Scriptures, he's also Lord of everything. Our positions and practices, therefore, must serve his lordship. We seek out him, first in the scriptures, for our approach to life.

The scriptures, however, do not speak to every issue, which leads us to believe that it's possible, in many cases, for different approaches to honor Jesus. The Spirit, for example, may lead one church to honor Jesus in one way and another church to honor him in another. We can therefore learn from other traditions. You don't have to give up your belief in the authority of the scriptures, for example, to learn from Catholics on the one hand and Charismatics on the other. For the last few years, I have benefited from a relationship with an Episcopalian priest who has a bent toward Eastern Orthodox theology. He has helped me perceive the movement of the Spirit in my life. You can learn from pagans, for that matter. If God can speak through an ass, he can speak through anyone (Numbers 22:28-30).

The Spirit also may lead a church to stop honoring Jesus in one way and to start honoring him in another. The Spirit may lead one person to start practicing a spiritual discipline and lead another person to stop practicing the same discipline. The Spirit, being both sovereign and creative, is not beholden to our pet approaches. He is dynamic, not static (John 3:8). If you want to honor Jesus, don't get too comfortable for too long.

Teveye, the protagonist in *Fiddler on the Roof*, leans heavily on his traditions but nevertheless demonstrates remarkable flexibility. He repeatedly invokes the scriptures, beginning with the line, "As the good book says ..." He dialogues with himself and with God regarding the validity of his traditions, alternately making the case for differing points of view. As soon as he finishes making a point in favor of one opinion, he launches into a counterargument with the words, "On the other hand ..." Usually, he's willing to sacrifice his traditions. But he's only willing to go so far. Flawed as he is, Teveye isn't a bad model for us. Some things we hold onto, and some we don't.

Healing a withered hand

After their encounter with Jesus in the field, the Pharisees conclude that Jesus is a threat to their aspirations and that he must be stopped. They're now looking for evidence against him. They sense an opportunity when a man with a withered hand comes into a synagogue on the Sabbath. For the Pharisees, healing on the Sabbath, like picking grain on the Sabbath, constituted a violation of the law. They deemed it permissible to heal on other days and even on the Sabbath if a life was in danger (Luke 13:14). The man in question, however, was not facing a life-threatening situation. A healing in this case would help the Pharisees make their case against Jesus. They're looking for mud to sling, not truth to believe.

In the story about picking heads of grain, the Pharisees questioned Jesus about the lawfulness of Sabbath activity. In this story, Jesus poses a similar question to the Pharisees. Jesus doesn't ask whether it's lawful "to heal" on the Sabbath or not; he literally asks, "Is it lawful to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?" He's echoing God, who literally told the Israelites when he made his covenant—his partnership—with them, "See I have set before you today life and good, and death and evil" (Deuteronomy 30:15). Even then, God promised to make a new covenant in which he would renew his people (Deuteronomy 30:1-14). The new covenant was connected with the advent of the kingdom of God, which would result in a final and eternal day of rest for God's people, when holy time would no longer be restricted to one day a week. The Sabbath, in fact, served to foreshadow the final day. The question, therefore, isn't so much what is and isn't permissible on the Sabbath but whether Jesus is bringing in the kingdom—and with it the new covenant and the final day of rest. If he is, then the Sabbath is fine day for healing. A healing on the Sabbath would signify the in-breaking of God's great day of rest.

The Pharisees see no advantage in pressing their argument. Furthermore, they aren't interested at this time in debating Jesus; they're only interested gathering evidence they can use against him. Therefore, they remain silent—and hope, we presume—that Jesus heals the man.

Jesus reacts to the Pharisees' silence in two ways. First, he's angry with them because they've turned the Sabbath into a national badge of loyalty and thereby rendered themselves both insensitive to human suffering and oblivious to the in-breaking of the kingdom. Second, he grieves for them because they are resolutely opposed to the healing that he would bring to their hardened hearts. He's not only angry with them because of what they do to others; he also grieves for them because of what they do to themselves.

Jesus, angry and grief-stricken, turns his attention to the man with the withered hand. When he healed the leprosy man, whom no one touched, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him (Mark 1:41). The man in the synagogue, however, is different. People would touch him, and he would touch others—but probably not with his withered hand. So Jesus instructs the man to stretch out his hand. The man complies, and Jesus restores his hand. It is important to note not only *that* Jesus heals but *how* he heals—and how he heals differently according to the needs of each person. Furthermore, Mark reports no movement on Jesus' part. He heals the man in such a way that the Pharisees would be hard-pressed to accuse him of working on the Sabbath.

The healing of the man with the withered hand echoes the healing of the paralyzed man (Mark 2:1-12). In each case, Jesus addresses a disabled man and then

speaks to opponents before healing the man. Just as Jesus' healing of the paralyzed man proved that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins, the healing of the man with the withered hand proves that the Son of Man has authority over the Sabbath.

Jesus not only restores the man, he also restores the Sabbath. As the Son of Man, he is Lord of the Sabbath, and he has the authority to interpret it and reinterpret it in order to rescue it. He wants to do for all Israel, including the Pharisees, what he did for the man's hand and for the Sabbath: he wants to restore it. Before healing the man, he literally instructed him to "rise." Israel itself needed to rise. In fact, it anticipated a national renewal that the prophet Ezekiel equated with a resurrection (Ezekiel 37). The man's hand was "withered," a word that Mark applies elsewhere both to those who wither spiritually and to a fig tree that withered after Jesus cursed it (Mark 4:6, 18-19; 11:21). In the narrative, the fig tree symbolizes Israel as a whole, which had withered spiritually.

Since returning to Capernaum (Mark 2:1), Jesus has messed with two national symbols—the temple and the Sabbath—and he's dined with Jews who have little regard for such symbols. The Pharisees have no power to arrest Jesus, so they conspire with the Herodians, supporters of Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee under Roman aegis. The Pharisees would normally find themselves on the opposite side of the political aisle from the Herodians, who collaborated with Rome. But, as the old saying goes, politics makes strange bedfellows. The Pharisees believe that Jesus must be stopped at all costs, including the cost of playing nice with political enemies.

The Pharisees didn't answer Jesus when he asked them whether it was lawful to do evil or to kill on the Sabbath. Their actions, however, speak for them. In their thinking, it's not lawful to heal someone on the Sabbath, but it's lawful—at least for them—to plan someone's death on the Sabbath. The Pharisees, not Jesus, are Sabbath-breakers.

Healing a hardened heart

It's not easy to recognize hard-heartedness in oneself. I find it much easier, in my mind, at least, to accuse someone else of hard-heartedness. The story of Jesus and the Pharisees, however, is a diagnostic tool. Are you, like the Pharisees, watching and hoping for someone to slip up? Are you vigilant about finding evidence that you can use against someone? Are you eager to turn even a positive development, like the healing of a withered hand, into an opportunity to accuse an opponent? Is your first inclination to look for everything that's wrong with something instead of everything that's right with it? Are you more interested in proving your case than in seeking the truth? In short, are you more interested in winning than in love? If you answer yes to any of these questions, then the Holy Spirit may be using the scriptures to diagnose hardness in your heart. If so, what should you do? Note first of all what your heart does to the heart of Jesus.

First, Jesus is angry for what your hard heart does to others. A rigid, Pharisee-like approach to life often imprisons others in your view of the world. It leaves no room for them to make mistakes. They'll feel you're more interested in their conformance than in their welfare. A hard heart doesn't nurture those you know. Instead, it strangles them. Others will learn to walk on egg shells around you or keep their distance. You anger Jesus, because he loves the people you're hurting.

Second, Jesus is grieved for what your hard heart does to yourself. Your hard heart not only imprisons others, it also imprisons yourself. Your rigid approach to life blocks you from receiving the love of God unless it comes to you in narrowly defined forms. It keeps you focusing on something like Sabbath observance or Bible study and screens out the Lord of the Sabbath. You grieve Jesus, because he loves you, and you're hurting yourself.

Jesus' anger and grief are sure signs that he wants to heal your hardened heart, just as he healed the man's withered hand. A hardened heart is a withered heart. It withers because it's not receiving the love it needs to thrive. One of the ways Jesus heals you is by making you aware of his feelings. Again, the Spirit of Jesus, through this story, may be making you aware of Jesus' anger and grief. Perhaps, even now, Jesus may be healing your hardened heart. Give your whole heart to him, both the soft parts and the hard parts. He can take it all. He wants it all. Whether or not David Wilcox is singing of Jesus in "Hard Part," the words reflect the sentiment of our Lord. Imagine Jesus speaking these words to you:

I know you think that the heat of your pain
Is more than I can stand
Burn it all in one big flame
And I will hold it in my hand

Now your eyes well up with tears
As desire mixes with you fears
After so many wounded years
Can you long for what you've missed
You want a cool breeze to dance with your flame
A long lost lover who knows your true name
A secret garden beyond this shame
And it all comes down to this

You think your drowning hope will die
In a sea without a shore
But I can drink that ocean dry
And still come back for more

I'm strong enough to take it
And I know what you've been through
You've got a whole heart
Give me the hard part
I can love that too⁶

If Jesus is healing your hardened heart, then he may be also delivering your positions and practices, just as he delivered the Sabbath from the possession of the Pharisees. True, you will have to discard positions and practices that don't honor Jesus. However, as Jesus heals your heart, you'll rediscover why you adopted certain positions and practices in the first place, and he will inhabit them in a new way that nourishes your heart and blesses others. You'll start more often with the spirit of the law and let God's heart inform the letter of the law. You may, for example, hear Jesus speaking to you in

fresh ways through the scriptures. I expect, for example, that I may someday return to my daily Bible reading schedule. In the meantime, however, I feel that Jesus is speaking to me in fresh ways through the Gospel of Mark.

Give him the hard part

When I was teaching the gospels to the interns two years ago, I made an off-hand reference to Mark 3:5 and noted that Jesus grieved for the Pharisees. One of the interns, Gay Gray, began to cry. (I tell this story with Gay's permission.) She explained that she had often heard people describe Jesus as a sarcastic smart-mouth who could put down anyone and win any argument. Mark's description of Jesus, however, opened Gay's heart to him in a new way. Gay and her family have since moved to Texas, but I spoke with her on the phone last week. Before the Spirit began showing her the heart of Jesus that day, Gay had connected well with the Father but not with Jesus. "I knew something was off," she said. "I was distant from Jesus, but I didn't know why. I put up walls. I was afraid of too much intimacy—with people, but also with God." She now understands that an inaccurate image of Jesus contributed to her distance from him. "I'm not holding back now," she said. "I'm progressing. It feels good not to be held back by an unknown fear."

The heart of Jesus pulsates with pain and love—and with anger, for what we do to others, and with grief, for what we do to ourselves. If there is hardness in our hearts, Jesus wants to soften it. You've got a whole heart. Give him the hard part. He can love that too.

Feb. 24, 2008

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¹ Sheldon Harnick, "Tradition," *Fiddler on the Roof*.

² Literary structure:

- A Grainfields on Sabbath: picking heads of grain (23)
 - B Pharisees question "doing" what is not "lawful" on Sabbath (24)
 - C Answer: What David did (25-26)
 - D Son of Man has authority over Sabbath (27-28)
- A' Synagogue on Sabbath: man with withered hand (1-3)
 - B' Jesus questions what is "lawful" to "do" on Sabbath (4)
 - C' Answer: What Jesus does (5).
 - D' Pharisees deny authority of Son of Man (6)

³ N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox Press), 30.

⁴ Mark depicts the David story as taking place during the time of Abiathar the high priest. In actuality, Ahimelech, Abiathar's father, was high priest at the time. The term "high priest," however, was applied to any member of the family of high priests. Mark may have identified Abiathar because his name was connected with that portion of scripture.

⁵ This is the second time in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus has obliquely identified himself as the Son of Man. In Daniel 7, the Son of Man is equivalent to the people of God (Daniel 7:13-27). In more or less claiming the title for himself, Jesus is saying that he is the true representative and leader of God's people and that he, in keeping with Daniel's vision, will triumph over his enemies to receive from God an everlasting kingdom.

⁶ David Wilcox and John Whalen, *Hard Part* (Gizz Da Baboo, SESAC, a division of Soroka Music Ltd.)