Sunday, June 1, 1997
THE FUNDAMENTALISM OF JESUS
Mark 2:23-3:6

Almost everyone's a fundamentalist about something. What do I mean by the word "fundamentalist?" In its broadest sense, being a fundamentalist means having certain basic principles that are not to be questioned or broken, or having a way of doing things, a methodology or routine, that you will not alter.

When applied to the Christian faith, the Fundamentalist movement may be said to have begun in 1910 with the publication of a series of little books entitled, The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth, which claimed to set forth the five fundamental Christian truths. More than 2.5 million copies of the twelve-volume series of these booklets were published and circulated, funded by two wealthy laymen.

The five doctrines set forth as "fundamental" were the virgin birth of Christ, the physical resurrection of Jesus, the inerrancy of the Scriptures in every respect, the substitutionary theory of the atonement, and the imminent, physical second coming of Christ.

Today, in a broader sense, the term fundamentalism, when applied to Christianity, may be defined as an organized attempt to preserve the authoritarian position of historic Protestantism against the rising tide of modernism. The term is now also used to describe strict authoritarianism that opposes any kind of modernism in any religious movement. So, we speak of Muslim fundamentalists as well.

As I said earlier, almost everyone's a fundamentalist about something. The jogger going out at 5:30 a.m. on a dark, cold morning is a fundamentalist about her exercise routine. The woodworker whose workshop looks like a display ad is a fundamentalist about the location of each and every one of his tools.

There are Christmas fundamentalists — those who insist that Christmas presents be opened on Christmas Eve, and others who insist that Christmas morning is the only proper time to open gifts.

Within the Christian faith, there are many varieties of fundamentalism. If you think a church is flexible and receptive to new ideas, try suddenly changing the prescribed Sunday morning order of worship. Or read a new translation of the familiar Christmas story on Christmas Eve, or use new words to a familiar Christmas carol. There are many kinds of liturgical fundamentalists.

Being a fundamentalist is not necessarily bad. We want to base our lives on strong foundations. Doing so can strengthen our lives and build up our sense of security.

However, there are also times when our fundamentalism can become too rigid, so much so that we allow a certain system or routine to get in the way of helping one another. We've all had the experience of being told by someone, "You can't do it that way. It's not according to the way the system is set up." Don't you sometimes want to shout, "Okay then, change the system. Maybe there's a better way of doing the job."

It's not a new problem. One day, as Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field, they began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands, and eat the grain. It was a natural thing to do as they were walking and talking. But the day on which they were doing this was not an ordinary day. It was the Sabbath. And there were witnesses who saw what they were doing. These witnesses were quick to accuse Jesus and his disciples of breaking the rules of the religious system outlined in the 4th commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it, you shall not do any work."

But what is work? What Jesus and his disciples had been doing might not seem like work to us, but the commandment about not working on the Sabbath had, through the years, accumulated all sorts of definitions, interpretations, and traditions. The letter of the law was completely spelled out. The prohibitions were very specific. It was a system fully defined. Thus, the critics of Jesus said, "What you and your disciples are doing is not lawful on the Sabbath."

Jesus answered, "You are right. There is a commandment about the Sabbath Day and keeping it holy, but you are misunderstanding it and misusing it." And then Jesus made this statement: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath." Or, to paraphrase, systems are created to serve humankind, rather than humankind being created to serve the system.

But they still didn't get the point. A little later that same day, Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would heal the man on the Sabbath so they could again charge him with breaking the Sabbath rule. This time Jesus said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" Jesus then healed the man.

What are some of the ways these stories of Jesus apply to us today, especially with regard to the systems we create?

Note first that Jesus was not in any way saying that observing the Sabbath, or the Lord's Day, as a day of rest, refreshment, and worship was wrong. Jesus himself, as the New Testament reminds us in other places, regularly went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. He obeyed the spirit of the law. He understood the value of this important tradition.

He knew that the observance of a day of rest and worship is part of our reverent acknowledgment of God's creative activity and a reminder that God and creation are holy. To set aside one day as holy is to remind us that all days are holy.

Jesus also knew that we need a change of pace, a time for rest from our ordinary round of activities. Our human nature, as does the rest of creation, requires a rhythm of work and rest. Life does not flow in a steady stream. It pulsates. Life is neither static sameness nor erratic change. It is characterized by hills and plateaus, starts and stops, high points and low points, holding patterns and landings, beginnings and endings.

We need times of rest and relaxation. The setting aside of regular periods or days of rest and a change of pace, like Sunday or some other day, is for our own good. The Sabbath was made for humankind.

On the other hand, like all systems, once they begin to function, traditions gather around them, and they take on a life of their own. Furthermore, systems have a way of growing and

encroaching, becoming rigid in their application, so much so that we can find ourselves serving the system rather than having the system serve us. It's a form of fundamentalism.

In Jesus' time, the system of the Sabbath had grown from the simple language of the 4th commandment to literally hundreds and hundreds of rules, regulations, and definitions about the Sabbath.

What happens is we soon discover we're serving the system instead of the system serving us. Remember, said Jesus, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath."

These words of Jesus need to be applied as a test to every institution, every procedure, every system, including all the rules, regulations, and traditions of religion.

It's so tempting to get so involved with our organization or system that our only goal is to get it running smoothly, and then soon we don't want people interfering with our systems and procedures. All systems tend to develop blind, instinctive urges to maintain themselves and not change. Worse, their own internal goals for survival become more important than the reason for which they were brought into being. It's so tempting to give in to this kind of fundamentalism.

Isn't it amusing to hear college, university, and public school administrators and teachers say once school is out for the year, "Now we can get our work done." Consider how smoothly elementary schools, junior highs, high schools, universities, and colleges would run if they didn't have to bother with the students.

I've never heard a hospital administrator or worker say this, but surely there have been those who have thought, "What wonderful hospitals we could run if the patients didn't get in the way to foul up our systems and procedures. Think of the gleaming laboratories, the antiseptic rooms, the faultless corridors, the impeccable charts, if only doctors, nurses, and administrators were allowed to populate the nation's hospitals." It's a temptation to think that hospitals exist primarily for those who work there.

Consider libraries. The book borrower is a nuisance who interferes with the Dewey decimal system and the perfect uniformity of each book in its proper place on the shelf. It's a temptation to think that libraries are for books and the people who work there, rather than for the people who come to read and borrow the books.

And don't forget the churches. If churches didn't have to put up with visitors and other kinds of outsiders who use the building, then the ministers and staff could spend all their time taking care of the members, and we wouldn't have to worry about reaching out to others. Then we wouldn't hear the complaint from members, "That visitor on Sunday morning came and took the seat that I've had every Sunday for thirty-three years."

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite passed by the man who was hurt and lying in the ditch by the side of the road, probably because they were in a hurry to get to the temple in Jerusalem to discuss some program aimed at helping people in need.

But there's another kind of fundamentalism that was exemplified by Jesus in the two examples from Mark's gospel noted earlier. His was the fundamentalism of love. It is based on the

principle that all systems should serve human beings. If a system or institution becomes too narrow and begins to prevent good from being done, then it needs to be made more flexible.

Life lived only according to rules or systems, with no exceptions permitted, is a crude form of morality. This is not to say that rules, laws, and commandments are not necessary. They are! Without the guidance of the law, we human beings will often confuse the demands of the spirit with the fantasies of self-indulgence.

But at the same time, we need to remember, as Jesus did, that all rules, all systems, all institutions are incomplete, and cannot possibly cover all the complexities or uniqueness of human existence. Could a loving husband and wife write into a code or set of rules the demands their love for each other makes upon them in their life together? It's not possible.

The fundamentalism of Jesus tells us that although rules, commandments, and systems are very important in our life together, they are not the source or power of Christian living because Christian living consists of more than the observance of a set of rules from God.

All laws, institutions, and systems are but means toward an end — they are not an end in themselves. It's when the system becomes an end in itself that we become angry with everyone who does not fit into our system or obey the rules to the letter.

Jesus taught that the highest and best moral values always transcend their embodiment in a particular social order, institution, or system. The law is fulfilled when we go beyond it in our behavior. That's why there are actions that are legal but at the same time immoral.

That's what Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets: I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.... For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of God."

The wonderful thing about the fundamentalism of Jesus, which is based on the fundamentalism of God's unconditional love, is that the more strictly you live by it, the greater your freedom. Instead of narrowing your vision, limiting your options, the fundamentalism of Jesus opens whole new worlds of possibilities and promise. It always offers one more chance, always goes one more mile, always trusts one more time, always believes one more possibility. Amen.