

“Special Occasion”

[Mark 2:23-28](#)

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In the house where I grew up, there was a dining room. It had a big table in the middle of it, with a cabinet on the side wall filled with fancy china that I think had once belonged to one of my great-grandmothers. And in the around twenty years that I spent in that house, I cannot remember a single time we ever dined in that dining room. I cannot remember a single time we ever used any of those china dishes. Not once. I think the idea was that we would use the dining room and the fine china for ‘special occasions’, but apparently no occasion was ever special enough – Birthdays, Christmas dinner, thanksgiving, each and every one we just ate at the kitchen table on the plain ordinary dishes we used each and every normal day of the year. Maybe they used them when I wasn’t home, who knows. As far as I can tell, those dishes just sat in that cabinet in that unused room for twenty years, collecting dust, waiting for a special occasion that never arrived.

And maybe you have a room like that. Maybe you have dishes like that. Maybe you’ve got one of those plastic covers for your sofa, so the cushions stay clean and soft and comfortable, even though no-one will ever know how comfortable it is because you never take the plastic off. Maybe you’ve got hockey sticks that no-one will ever use to play hockey, because they’re autographed, or books that no one will ever read, because they’re first editions, or toys that no child will ever play with, because they’re collectible figurines. We love to take ordinary things and decide that they’re special, meant for special occasions, set apart for something out of the ordinary, special days, special guests, not to be wasted on the ordinary mundane routines of everyday life. And I understand that, I really do. Ordinary, everyday stuff gets broken and wrecked really quickly, especially when there are children involved, and sometimes it’s nice to know that even if everything else in your life is falling apart, there’s something special hidden away out of the reach of those grubby little peanut-butter covered fingers, something that will stay pristine and untouched and special. But if it always stays out of

touch and out of reach, if the special occasion you're saving that thing for never comes, if it just stays behind glass or under wraps forever, then what's the point of having it? What's the point of keeping something special if it never gets used at all? Couches are meant to be sat on. Dishes are for Dining. Toys should be played with, Books should be read. If everything special just ends up locked away out of reach, then that nothing special can ever happen, a special occasion will never come.

Keep that idea in mind when we read today's passage from the gospel of Mark. The people of Israel understood that the Sabbath day was meant to be Holy – all the way back in the book of Exodus, God had instructed the people to keep the seventh day of the week as a holy day, and Holy doesn't mean what we usually think it means. When we think Holy, we think pious and perfect and a little stuck up, but when the Bible calls something holy, it means that that thing is set apart, set apart from ordinary use for God's use. Something that is holy isn't supposed to just get used for ordinary purposes in everyday life, it is meant to be set apart for something special, a special occasion, a special guest, a special purpose. And because God had rested on the seventh day during the creation of the universe, that's how the people of Israel made that day special, by resting from all work, all activity, from making sure that everyone in their community used that day as a day of rest, set apart from the rest of the week and the regular grind of daily life. And that is a wonderful thing. Keeping the Sabbath Holy, set apart as a special day devoted to rest, devoted to God, that practice and discipline helped shape the people of Israel as God's special possession, God's holy people – they were defined by that practice and set apart from the other nations around them as a witness and an example for the way God wanted them to live. Keeping the Sabbath day Holy was a way for the people of Israel to remember that God was Holy, and that they were holy too, set apart by God for a special purpose in the world.

So you can understand why people might be a little upset at Jesus and his disciples when they're spotted picking grain on the Sabbath. Maybe that doesn't seem like a lot of work – they're not breaking out the tractors and harvesters here, just picking a few heads of grain to snack on as they walk through the fields – but it does technically count as work, and it puts that

holiness that has defined the people of Israel as special and set apart for God's special purposes, it puts all of that at risk. Because hey, if you can pick a few bits of grain, why not gather a handful? Why not make some flour, do some baking, make yourself a meal, maybe a few extra loaves for the road, maybe sell some of those loaves to make a little extra cash, and the next thing you know, you're spending the seventh day like every other day, working and hustling, spending every waking moment trying to get a little further ahead, just like all the other nations around you. Seeing these disciples picking and eating grain on the Sabbath is like seeing great-grandma's fine china dishes coming out of the cabinet to hold breakfast cereal or McDonald's hamburgers, or your autographed hockey stick being used to shoot tennis balls into garbage cans in the parking lot. It's taking something that is supposed to be holy, something that is supposed to be special, and making it ordinary.

And I'm sure that the Pharisees who brought this entirely reasonable complaint to Jesus were expecting him to be entirely reasonable about it – knock some sense into his disciples, get them to stop flagrantly breaking the law and treating the Sabbath like any other day. But that isn't what Jesus does. Instead, he does something incredible. He reminds these concerned Sabbath defenders of the time when David went to God's tabernacle and asked the priests for, and received, the Holy Bread of the presence, bread meant only for the priests to eat. Now, when that story took place, David wasn't the King yet. He had been anointed as king by the prophet Samuel, but nobody knew about that – the ruling king was still King Saul, and Saul had declared David to be an outlaw, sentenced him to death. So David was a fugitive, running from the law, and nobody knew he was destined to be King. Nobody knew that he was meant to be anybody special, except God. And yet David walked right up to the holiest place in all Israel, to the holiest people in all Israel, and asked them for some of the holiest things in all Israel, and he got them. Because he needed bread, and the priests saw that he was in need, so they shared what they had – even though it was against the rules. So Jesus isn't saying that the Sabbath rules don't matter. He's not trying to tear down the law, he's not trying to do away with what makes the people of Israel special and holy. He's saying that special things are meant to be used when someone special arrives. When the King shows up, you break out the fine china. You take the plastic off the couch. You pull out the best bread and the finest wine and all the

things you've been saving for a special occasion, because what could be more special than a visit from the King? Even if he doesn't look like a king yet. Even if he hasn't been proclaimed King yet. Even if he's just a wandering fugitive, or a travelling preacher, or a carpenter from Nazareth. If you've got eyes to see the truth, to see what God sees, you'll know when someone truly special has arrived, and then you'll know that it's time to break a few rules. It's time to get those special things out of storage and put them to good use. Because if the King showing up isn't a special occasion, then nothing will ever be special. Special things, holy things, things that are set apart, the point isn't for these things never to be used, to sit cloistered away untouched. Special things are meant to be used when the time is right, when the time is special. The purpose of bread is for eating, the purpose of wine is for drinking, the purpose of the Sabbath is to dedicate yourself to serving and loving the King of Kings, and so when the King shows up on the Sabbath, you stop resting and you celebrate.

Right now we are halfway through the season of Lent, a season of fasting and resting and waiting, preparing ourselves, making ourselves holy as we anticipate the coming of Easter. But even in the middle of this season of waiting and resting and preparation, it's still important for us to remember that we aren't waiting alone. The King of Kings is here with us. Jesus Christ is here with us. We don't always recognize him here in our midst – sometimes we meet him in holy things, in a loaf of bread, in a cup that we share, in special gifts set apart for a special purpose. And sometimes he comes in unexpected ways, in ordinary people, in the faces of the least of our brothers and sisters. But wherever we meet him, when the King comes to visit, that's reason enough to celebrate. That's reason enough to break out the fine china and open the good wine and turn a season of waiting into a celebration, turn a day of rest into a party. Today, and every day that Jesus Christ is with us is a special day, a holy day, a day set apart for feasting and laughter and singing and praise, for sharing bread and wine, for telling the stories of God's grace and love even in the midst of trouble, grace and love brought to us by our wandering, impoverished, fugitive King. Today, the world might seem ordinary, but when your eyes are opened to see Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, waiting with you, then you can see his holiness and love given for you, ready to transform the ordinary into extraordinary, ready to make this day and every day we spend in the presence of Jesus Christ a special occasion, a

moment worth celebrating. Today as we gather at this table, may we receive the bread of his presence, may we become holy as he is holy, may we join in the celebration with the King of Kings, now and forevermore. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.