

## **“Stretch Out Your Hand!”**

**Text: Mark 3:1-6**

It was Sabbath day. And for a devout Jewish rabbi like Jesus, Sabbath is a day he would never miss. On this particular Sabbath, all eyes were on Jesus— Mark said “they watched him to see whether he would do something out of the ordinary”. A man with a withered hand was there. The same man who for so many years have come to this synagogue and never missed a worship. And he caught Jesus’ attention. This poor, nameless man’s hand was withered and has been for so many years. We don't know if he was a victim of arthritis or rheumatism but for sure this man suffers from a condition called hand atrophy - a condition that causes muscles of the hand deteriorate and wither away. When the hand is immobile for an extended period of time, the muscles begin to lose power and size. Can you imagine what life would be like if your hand was immobile and withered? Your hand is wasted – you can’t do a lot of things – be it gardening, playing your favourite sport or playing a musical instrument - no writing or computer games, no baking or cooking, you get the picture - life could get pretty limited, boring and so unpleasant if that's all we had of the world.

When Jesus saw him – this man with a withered hand, he called him to come forward. You can feel the tension in the room when everyone gazed at the man and waited for Jesus to do his next act. Then Jesus pointed questions to his adversaries – those who were die-hard, pious people who apply strict religious observance of the Sabbath according to law: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” And they were silent. They could not answer Jesus. The man perhaps was surprised too. I wonder if it didn't make him very nervous. I wonder if he wanted to be noticed. He was used to being invisible. He was after all a man with disability. When the people in his village saw him coming down the street, they didn't say, "Here comes Joseph or Thomas." They say, "Here comes that man with a withered hand." That's how he is known — not by his name or his family history or what he does for a living. He is known by labels - the crippled man, the handicapped man, the one whose hand looks different from us, the "man with a withered hand." But in that moment of encounter, he could not even understand the healing that was coming to him in the person of Jesus, the healer.

In front of the scrutinizers, Jesus did something that I'm sure no one had done to him for a long, long time, something that violated the religious taboos of the day. Jesus cured the man on

a Sabbath Day. He asked him to stretch his hand and healed him. The man's withered hand was restored to health! Freed from its physical state of bondage. Mark said: He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. In the first century world where Jesus and the man lived, having any physical deformity was a curse – a result of being sinful or the work of the devil. It was viewed as God's punishment for something one has done. He was deemed to be not only physically withered but spiritual as well. I can easily imagine myself as a spiritual cripple if I had suffered physical deformities like he had. In essence, he had lost not only his dignity but his humanity as well. He's suffering a condition of spiritual darkness and bondage. If people thought about him at all, it was probably with scorn, seeing him as cursed, his condition a punishment from God. If this story was made into a movie, you might think that the climax had come unfolding into a happy ending when Jesus asked the man to stretch his hand and was healed, but surprise, surprise – a twist in the story is still to come. Jesus' compassion and act of love for this man with a withered hand provoked anger and outburst from the religious leaders of the synagogue. Mark writes: "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."

The story tells us that it was the inappropriate timing of Jesus' healing that ignited their anger. Afraid to confront Jesus directly, they were enraged that Jesus had violated the fourth commandment by "working" on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:9 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15). We can imagine the Pharisees saying: 'Folks, we are here to worship God, to offer praise or prayers and to read and listen to God's words. We are not here to do works of healing. This is Sabbath – a day of rest. Couldn't Jesus have waited just one day to do his healing business when the Sabbath would be over? And for you, man with a withered hand and those of you who are here, come and be healed on those other days not on the Sabbath.' But let me explain here that we do an injustice to the Pharisees if we write them off as bad people. They were *good* people — good people trying to preserve and protect those things that were sacred for them— laws, rituals, traditions, culture — that mediated faith for them. Don't we do exactly the same thing when we hold fast to our favourite worship practices, our cherished spiritual disciplines, and our beloved traditions? I like what Debie Thomas has to say about this: "*The Pharisees were not wrong to uphold the Sabbath. They were absolutely right. But rightness is not love. Rightness is not*

*compassion. Rightness will never get us to Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath. Only compassion will do that.*”

Jesus challenges the habits of Pharisaic law. Jesus explodes at this human callousness and their hypocrisy. I understood this reaction of Jesus as vouching that human compassion, healing, and wholeness are far more important than religious rightness and rituals. The first few verses prior to this story we have read, Jesus laid down his arguments about the meaning of Sabbath. He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then Jesus continued with this aphorism, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” No, said Jesus, compassion and love would *not* wait one more day to heal a human being in need. This man, says Jesus, is a beloved child of God. He is part of humanity and blessing for the whole world. He isn't the withered-hand man, he isn't a nobody. He shall not be put aside, ignored and given a label to keep him in his place.

A preacher once said: “When religious rituals like Sabbath-keeping and fasting — or our Bible studies, sermons, church attendance, and retreats — are divorced from human health and wholeness, whenever a believer "turns away from others, your own flesh and blood" (Is. 58:7), then our religion has gone very bad indeed. Conversely, when you care for your neighbor like you would care for your own self, you have fulfilled the deepest purposes of all religious rituals.”<sup>1</sup> (Dan Clendenin). If we are called to follow Jesus and to love the way Jesus loved, it's clear then that this story gives us a model of what it means to be the living church - the Body of Christ - not just on Sundays but every single day of our lives. Every one of us, in our daily lives, has the occasion to encounter the man with a withered hand. And there are so many of him in our community or even in our congregation that sometimes we easily ignore. Let me describe him:

He could be the father of a child suffering from a life-threatening disease. He is there, in hospital waiting rooms, longing for his child to be healed.

---

1 Dan Clendenin, “He Put His Hands on Her”, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net>

He could be the new immigrant wanting to learn how to speak English so he could earn a living to feed his family.

He is there, in our cities and our neighborhoods, longing for people to offer help.

He could be a young teenager suffering from identity crisis and being bullied at school for being different.

He is there, alone in the night, longing for acceptance from his loved ones and peers.

At some point in our lives, we too are like him. We are withered and shriveled and wasted over by loneliness, or grief, or depression or anxiety. He represents those whose financial difficulties or mental illnesses or physical ailments or unemployment shrunk them and dried them up. What is our response as the body of Christ when we encounter the man with a withered hand? Should we wait a day or two to show our compassion and love? Or should we act here and now as Jesus did that Sabbath morning?

Isn't Jesus sometimes just too much? Love just pours out of him, almost as if he can't help it. He can't help noticing the invisible ones, can't help loving them, can't help healing them. Just as Jesus sees all what makes the man's hand withered for so many years, we too must see the same things about each of us. We must open our eyes, our ears, our heart deep into our need: see, hear and feel what sometimes we cannot even see, hear or feel ourselves, those things that sometimes we're often afraid to look inside ourselves because we know we are bogged down by lots of stresses and emotional baggage that we'd rather not deal with. As human beings, we have experienced suffering over the years — the rejections, the disappointments, the betrayals, the failures, the illnesses, the pains, the hurts, the fears.

Today, compassionate healing love through Jesus calls us over. Jesus says to us, "Come. Let me put my hands on you, touch you and heal you. Let me help you take all that is withered, desiccated and crooked in your life and make it straight and strong. Let me help you take away all those things that shrunk you and make you whole again. Gain your confidence back and live again. You are a child of God, you are loved unconditionally. Come and be set free."

Let this Good News encourage us to live like Jesus and offer compassionate healing to others as he did here and now. Thanks be to God. Amen.