

Stretch Out your Hand
Mark 3:1-6

Spirituality finds its deepest level at the place the poet T.S. Eliot called “the ground of our beseeching.”¹ Jesus meets us there today with his imperative: “Stretch out your hand.”

I

There is a conflict going on in this text between Jesus and the religious leaders over how to obey the Sabbath laws. In the last verse preceding this chapter Jesus had said, startlingly, audaciously:

The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath; so the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath.

The religious leaders were trying, as many religious leaders try, to control the flow of God’s grace. They thought themselves appointed to have their hands on the spigot. But God’s grace is not a water line; it is the rain, the river, the dew and the mists.

John Dominic Crossan says that the kingdom of God Jesus preached was a “brokerless kingdom.” You need no broker to enter the kingdom. And no one has the exclusive franchise on grace. Just think of the ways the church un-invites or bans people from the communion table. Your theology has to be right, your

morals just so. During the 2004 Presidential campaign one Catholic bishop told his priests not to serve the Eucharist to any parishioners who voted Democrat. (This also happened in 2008 and 2012.) You can't dispense grace to *anybody!* Somebody's gotta be in control!

In the minds of the religious leaders of Jesus' day you couldn't heal people on the Sabbath, and Jesus was messing around with the rules.

II

On this particular day Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and saw a man with a withered hand. His heart went out to him. The religious leaders watched to see if Jesus would heal the man, so they might accuse him of breaking the Sabbath law.

"Come to me", Jesus said to the man. The man's first act of courage was to leave the crowd and stand alone before Jesus.

Jesus knew the trap was set, so he had decide between healing the man or drawing back so to avoid trouble. Healing came first. Taking charge of the moment he said aloud: *Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?*

He was reaching for the deep intent of the law: to help or to harm? For Jesus beneath every command was the law of love. Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day: “for the sake of tradition you void the word of God.” (See Mark 7:12) The church is always tempted to put tradition ahead of the Word of God.

The crowd grew silent. The text says that Jesus was “angry”, yes angry, and “grieved” at the hardness of their hearts. They would rather control the mechanism of healing—who gets to heal and under what conditions—than to see a healing; they were more interested in protecting the Bible than living it.

In the 1960s during the Civil Rights crisis a prominent church in North Carolina, heard that some blacks were planning to join them for worship. The deacons formed a line in front of the church to keep any of them from coming into worship. A phalanx of bigotry. For many white churches in the South segregation was God’s will and God’s law. Their preachers told them so. One of the deacons who stood in that line said later that it was the most shameful moment of his life.

Jesus’ response was anger mixed with sorrow at the hardness of their hearts.

III

Then Jesus faced the man with the withered hand and said, “Stretch out your hand!” Not the strong one, the whole one, but the withered one. The one you try to hide with most every waking thought. How should I stand? How should I dress?

For most of us what we try to hide is not something outward but inward, something bruised, broken, withered inside. In the Iona hymn “Will You Come and Follow Me?” we sing Jesus’ words to us: “Will you love the ‘you’ you hide, if I but call your name?”

Who wants to be sick in public, even if it means getting well? “Stretch out your hand,” Jesus said. In front of everybody! I had a dream many years ago. In the dream I was lying on an operating table set in the middle of a large church sanctuary. It was open heart surgery, the doctors were at work, my chest split open, heart exposed, and all the congregation was watching. “Lord, I want my heart healed but not in so public a way!” Perhaps some are healed in public to give hope to those who suffer in public.

“Come forward”, Jesus said to the man, then “Stretch out your hand!” Will we dare come forward, stretch out our hand?

I think Freud was right, that we all have within us a “life-force” and a “death instinct”. Which will we choose? As God says in Deuteronomy: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life!”

There are many reasons we draw back. We are ashamed of our weakness. Shame is a killer of the human spirit. Or we are ashamed of how long we have struggled. We are, as Flannery O’Connor said of her lupus, “sick of being sick”, and despair is just around the corner. We are afraid of, hoping, trying and failing again.

But Jesus is ever ready to meet your hand with his and lead you to healing and life, so you might live with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, live fully and freely.

IV

I think about how many of Jesus’ commands were liberating and empowering, helping us lay hold of a power beyond ourselves, and deep within ourselves:

Rise, take up your pallet and walk.

Young man, get up.

Little girl, I say to you, arise

Your sins are forgiven: Go in peace.

Receive your sight.

Stretch out your hand.

Think of his healings: a twelve year old girl, a woman sick for twelve years, a leper, a blind man, and on and on.

Jesus' voice is a tender and compelling one, inviting us to health and wholeness. In the gospels Jesus called *everyone* to change, change in the way *they most needed to change*. (The way everyone else wants you to change may not be the change you most need and God wants!)

Writer Anne Lamott battled for years with an eating disorder and alcohol addiction. Her mind, she said, was sometimes “like a bad neighborhood you don’t want to go into alone.” Jesus went there with her. She wrote once, “Everything I’ve ever let go of has claw marks on it.” and in her book *Plan B*, she wrote:

Unfortunately, change and forgiveness do not come easily for me, but any willingness to let go inevitably comes from pain; and the desire to change changes you, and jiggles the spirit, gets to it somehow, to the deepest, hardest, most ruined parts. And then Spirit expands, because that is its nature, and it drags along the body, and finally, the mind.²

Stretch out your hand.

V

Jesus' command is a word to the church as well as to persons. We, the church, are his *banged up but being saved people*.

I remember years ago going to get MOSE surgery to remove some skin cancer on my upper lip. In this procedure the doctor removes the lesion, then puts a pressure bandage on you and sends you to the waiting room while the tissue is being studied. If there's not a clean margin, back you go in for another round, and so on, until the area is clean of cancer.

I remember going into the waiting room with a big pressure bandage on my lip. I sat down and looked around. One person had a big bandage on his nose, another on the ear, another on the cheek, another on the forehead, another on the chin. I laughed to myself about the sight of us. "Here is the human condition", I thought. "Here is the church!" All of us needing some healing somewhere.

"Stretch out your hand", Jesus says. When we stretch out our hand we join the human race and call out to God for some kind of healing, body, mind, spirit. How would you stretch out your hand today? And for what?

Years back Woody Allen made a movie called *Broadway Danny Rose*. In it Woody Allen plays a down on his luck talent agent with a motley crew of clients with dwindling talent. Here they were: an over the hill lounge singer, a one-legged tap dancer, a ventriloquist who stuttered, a hypnotist who could get people into trances but not out of them, a guy who twisted balloons into animals, a man with a parrot who sang Frank Sinatra's *My Way*.

On Thanksgiving Day, they came to Danny Rose's house for Thanksgiving dinner. He served frozen turkey dinners, warmed up but still in their aluminum containers. Here is the church! I exclaimed. And this is every communion service I've ever been a part of.

We are not God's perfect, whole, gleaming people. We are the ones in the surgeon's waiting room each with our bandages. We are the one-legged tap dancer, the over-the-hill crooner, the stuttering ventriloquist, the hypnotist who can get people into trances but not out of them, the balloon artist and the parrot singing *My Way*!

And here we are getting ready for communion. And Jesus says, Come, not because you are perfect, but because you're not, not because you have it all together but because you don't, not because you've passed the Bible quiz but because you're still trying to figure it out.

Come unto me, you who are weary and heavy laden, he says, as he carves the turkey and ladles the gravy. And says just the words we need to hear:

Rise, take up your pallet and walk

Young man, get up.

Little girl, arise

Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.

Receive your sight.

Stretch out your hand.

Stretch out your hands, he says to us now, offering us the bread and cup. Take the bread and eat. Take the cup and drink. This is your healing.

1. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (N.Y.: A Harvest Book, 1971), p.57

2. Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (N.Y.: Riverhead Books, 2005), p. 221.