



“Stretch out Your Hand”

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June 3, 2018

Mark 2:23-3:6

André Gide, a French author and a Nobel Prize winner tells about an incident that took place when he made a journey into the interior of the Belgian Congo. His party had been pushing ahead at a fast pace for a number of days, and one morning when his European colleagues were ready to set out again, their native bearers, those who carried the food and equipment, were found sitting about, making no preparation for the new day's journey. When questioned, they said quite simply that they had been traveling so fast in the last few days that they had gotten ahead of their souls and were going to stay quietly in camp for the day in order that their souls could catch up with them. In their own way the native helpers were describing the need for a rhythm in life between activity and rest. If we move beyond or lag behind the purpose God has for us, we might just lose our souls.

Stretch out your hand. That is what Jesus told the man with the withered hand, the paralyzed hand, the man who sought the help of the religious community to heal him and make him whole. He needed spiritual leaders with souls to reach out their hands in solidarity and love and help, and all he got was the clenched fists of deception, denunciation, and dismissal. The man with the debilitated life was reaching out for God, and he only found closed hands.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus taught his disciples to have open hands, hands that reach out in love to people rather than afflict them under the law of oppressive rules. Jesus taught a law of love and that is the essence of Sabbath. We are called to rest in the love of God, to sabbath in the love of God's creation, and extend our hands in service and healing to the world.

But in order to understand Jesus' command to “stretch out your hand,” we must see the actions of Jesus and his disciples compared to the religious leaders of the day. The text says, as Jesus was going through the grain fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees then said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” But as I just said, Jesus was living under the law of love, not of a restrictive and hurtful empire. The disciples were stretching out their hands, reaching out to a harvest of nourishment, because they were hungry and needy. They had been taught by Jesus that God's love is abundant and that they need only to reach out and embrace the beauty and bounty of God's world.

And so, as the disciples were walking along the road one Sabbath day, probably on the way to the synagogue where they would encounter the man with the withered hand, they became hungry. Maybe they didn't have time to eat a meal that morning, or maybe they forgot to pack their cooler full of snacks. Either way, they were hungry. And so, as they walked along, they

picked some stalks from a nearby field and ate the heads of grain. They did this by rubbing the grain between their fingers and hands in order to separate the grain from the chaff.

Now, I know what you might be thinking. Were they stealing grain? No, this wasn't considered stealing. Deuteronomic law clearly allowed people who were hungry to pick stalks of grain and eat them (Deut 23:24-25). And they could eat as much as they wanted. This was a form of practical welfare – we saw it practiced in the book of Ruth as well. Those in need could glean the edges of the field where grain was left for the poor and hungry. This was not what the Pharisees were complaining about. They were upset that the disciples were walking through the middle of the field on their journey to the synagogue, blatantly making a statement that they did not have to abide by Sabbath rules. The disciples were stretching out their hands, picking grain, and rubbing the stalks in their palms on a Sabbath day. They were harvesting on the Sabbath and doing so with boldness.

The Pharisees had declared that such actions were considered work and it was a violation of God's law to work on the Sabbath. For the Pharisees and even us today, religion can be a bunch of rules, regulations, and rituals that keep us closed-fisted and closed-off and closed-minded to the needs of the world. And these rules, regulations, and rituals become more important than grace, mercy, inclusion, acceptance, and kindness. More important than serving other human beings in need. More important than stretching out our hands. More important than love.

And it was with this recent event of Jesus going against the grain and allowing the disciples to pluck stalks on the Sabbath, that Jesus entered the synagogue, the place where the mercy and love of God should've been on full display. Jesus entered the synagogue and walked right into a trap. The man with the withered and paralyzed hand was bait. He wasn't even a person. He was a pawn of Jesus's enemies so that they could trap him healing, working, and helping on the Sabbath.

But Jesus, with the law of love in his heart saw the man with the withered hand and knew that life was more important than misery. That an outstretched hand was more important than a clenched fist, that an open hand was an expression of a need. Jesus told the hurting man to stretch out his hand. And with that statement, Jesus was saying that the Pharisees refused to open their own hands to God in the spirit of receptivity and redemption and renewal. That is the problem with closed minds, hard hearts, and clenched fists – the unwillingness to let go of what others have done to us or said to us. The unwillingness to let go of our own ambitions, our own anger, our own insecurities, and our own prejudices long enough to embrace our neighbors. Today many of us are white-knuckling our own ideas and our own ways of doing things instead of opening up our grip and letting God's love invite us into new, outstretched lives.

Henri Nouwen tells the story of an older woman in a psychiatric center who was acting wildly, swinging her arms at everyone and everything in sight, and scaring people so much that the doctor had to take everything away from her, everything except a coin which she gripped tightly as if it were her last possession. She grasped the coin as if being deprived of it would mean that she would lose her very self if it was taken away. Her fear was that if she lost her last coin, she would have nothing left. Nouwen says that this is also the great inhibiting factor in our lives as Christians today. Nouwen puts it this way: "When you are asked to pray you are asked to open

your tightly clenched fists and give up your last coin... You feel it safer to cling to a sorry past than to trust in a new future. So, you fill your hands with small, clammy coins which you don't want to surrender." We cling to resentment or revenge so tightly that we make ourselves sick and cannot reach out to others. We cling tightly to old systems and structures that we cannot forgive our enemies and welcome the stranger. We cling tightly to wrong ideas about God, other people, and ourselves and we refuse to release our bitter feelings. We can't seem to let go and reach out our hands.

Clenched fists full of false treasures buy us nothing but misery and misunderstanding. Clenched fists keep us from experiencing the love of God. Clenched fists mean that we are afraid to let these false treasures go, for fear of what will happen if we really open up our hands to God. But we hear Jesus say, "Stretch out your hand!" Church, stretch out your hand! The man with a withered hand needed healing. The religious leaders needed to loosen their grip. And Jesus commanded them all to stretch out their hands, to take the chance by being vulnerable, to take the chance by accepting the outcast, to take the chance at being healed. The man stretched out his hand and was made whole. But the Pharisees were watching, with stern faces, closed minds, hard hearts, and clenched fists, trying to trap Jesus whom they hated, unwilling to consider his new teaching about forgiveness and openness. The Pharisees did not stretch out their hands and they clung to their old ways.

As Christians, we have some unlearning to do when it comes to our sacred texts and solemn assemblies. Just as systems and structures, empires and authorities have been created with the purpose and intention to keep a few in power while oppressing others, or a man with a withered hand as the object of our pity and charity but not a partner or participant in the fullness of our community, the words of sacred scripture and the rules and rituals of our religious routines have too often been manipulated and mishandled to instill fear and not comfort, to foster quiet submission and not radical transformation, to proclaim deep separation and sadness rather than grace and peace and lovingkindness. The work of reclaiming and reinterpreting the laws of our faith is justice work. It is love work.

Jesus modeled this re-interpreting work for us when he stood in the temple and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus modeled this re-interpreting work for us when he walked through the fields with his disciples and reached out his hand to take stalks of grain and rub them in his palms. Jesus modeled this re-interpreting work for us when he healed the man with the withered hand in the synagogue, revealing a new law of love in the face of those who wanted to destroy him. Jesus was redefining religion and reinterpreting it, too, because we human beings forget how big the story of God is. We need to be reminded, each and every day, that the story of God is intertwined with the story of our lives and our love of others.

This week, church, I challenge you to stretch out your hand. I challenge you to reinterpret the privilege and power that refuses to bring healing to this nation. I challenge you to open your arms to one another over and over again. I challenge you to not get absorbed into the hurtful systems and structures of our culture and forget that the ways of God are different from the ways

of power and empire. I challenge you to remember that Jesus has drawn us into the imagination of God and beckons us to pursue the law of love, not with clenched fists and closed hearts but with open and outstretched hands. Stretch out your hand.