

Luke 6:1-11

“Withered Hearts”

I am going to talk about my husband this morning and, yes, I am aware that he is right here in the choir loft! About ten years ago, we were taking a Mediterranean cruise with our best friends and traveling companions. We were leaving out of Barcelona, Spain and decided to go a day early and explore the city. There was a particular cathedral that we wanted to see, and we determined that the most economical way to get there was on the subway. Since our friends are two of the smartest people I know and I was a Spanish major in college, we decided we could get there just fine.

So the four of us entered the underground subway system and were studying the time charts and routes on the wall. About the time we determined which line we should get on, we also realized that it would be arriving within about four minutes. I turned to tell Danny and, surprise! He was gone.

You see, Danny likes to wander. So much so that I recently learned from one of his cousins that his mother used to tether him to the clothes line so she could hang up clothes without him being two streets over before she knew what happened. In Barcelona, Danny had just been looking at things and wandered into a different tunnel. Thankfully, we were able to retrieve him and get on the right train. But this experience earned him the name “little brother” whenever we travel together. And “Where’s little brother?” gets asked frequently.

About a year or so later, Danny was involved in some kind of leadership forum and took one of these personality tests that is designed to help you work together as a group. And I was not surprised when he got the results and the number one thing on his list was, “Has a disregard for the rules.” Kind of curious, since he grew up with a father who was head of the FBI in

Greenville. I, on the other hand, am cautious and quite a rule follower, sometimes to a fault. So there have been times in our marriage when Danny has reminded me that there are still Pharisees among us.

All of this rushed into my mind as I began preparing the message based on this morning's miracle story. The passage is really a two-part story with the miracle taking place in the second half, but it is more effective to study it all together. The common denominator is both stories involve working on the Sabbath. So while "Little Brother" might really enjoy being able to get away with bending the rules, the Pharisees were quite upset. They also saw it as a way to discredit this new Rabbi, who was developing quite a following, named Jesus of Nazareth.

In the first story, Jesus and his disciples are traveling around on the Sabbath day, working and sharing the Gospel and, as they walk through a grain field, they pull some of the grain off and eat it. They did this because they were hungry. The Pharisees are quick to point out that they have violated the Law of Moses which prohibits working on the Sabbath.

Now all of this sounds completely absurd to us. But in the eyes of the religious authorities, they were guilty of reaping, threshing, winnowing and preparing food. Four violations in one mouthful! This approach to the Sabbath continues today among Orthodox Jews.

In early 1992, tenants let three apartments in an Orthodox neighborhood in Israel burn to the ground while they asked a rabbi whether a telephone call to the fire department on the Sabbath would violate Jewish law. Observant Jews are forbidden to use the phone on the Sabbath, because doing so would break an electrical current, which is considered a form of work. In the half-hour it took the rabbi to decide "yes," the fire spread to two neighboring apartments.

Yet in defense of strict Jews in Jesus' day and now, the Law states in Exodus 31:14: "You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people." So the Pharisees are quick to condemn them.

But as we are told in Matthew's Gospel, written FOR the Jews, Jesus said many times: "I come not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it." This is because Jesus knew that the problem with the Law was that the Pharisees had distorted the intent of the Law with their interpretations. When the interpretations of Jewish scholars were written into a commentary, they had added over 600 laws to the original Law that God gave. Jesus also knew that there is no law saying that you cannot feed hungry people. So, he challenges them by questioning their knowledge of their very own Law and of their history.

"Remember the time that our ancestor David and his armies were tired and hungry and were allowed to eat the bread of the Presence, the HOLY bread, set for the High priest? David was not condemned that day." His point might have been well-received if he had not added, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

You see, these were fighting words! This was a direct claim to Deity. Jesus said that He had the authority to know if His disciples broke the Sabbath law, because **He** is the Lord of the Sabbath. However, rather than dwell on the anger of the Pharisees, Luke moves on to ANOTHER violation of the Sabbath, which includes our miracle story today.

This time, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when a man with a withered hand entered. Immediately, the Pharisees were on high alert, waiting to catch Jesus in the act of sinning again. We don't know anything about the man – if we was born with a malformed hand. If he was

injured in an accident or if he suffered from what we would probably call arthritis or maybe palsy today.

No matter the circumstance, he would not have been able to work, play, or do any chores. Most likely he was poor because he could not hold a job. I imagine his whole life was limited by his condition. And in Jesus' society, any illness, injury or malformation was seen as a punishment for some unknown sin, so it is also likely that he was ostracized from society. Perhaps even forced from his home, living on the outskirts – a man in the margins.

It is also significant that Luke tells us it is his *right* hand that is withered. Luke is not usually the evangelist who includes such details. Therefore, we must believe that he was trying to help the audience understand even more how desperate the man had become.

You see, in Jewish culture, the right hand is the most important one. The right hand is used to convey blessings when the ceremonial birthright is passed on. It is the one that was used in covenant making between two men – in the way we would “Shake on a deal” to make it official. Also, to be placed at someone's right hand at a dinner party was the highest honor. That is why we say, when we repeat the Apostles' Creed that Jesus “ascended into Heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God.” This man would *never* be honored, *never* enter into an important agreement, *never* be able to give a blessing, and certainly *never* receive one!

Also, by mentioning that it is his right hand that is withered, it is possible that Luke is trying to highlight his brokenness. And let's face it, aren't we all a little broken, especially right now? Life is hard, even under the best of circumstances. School, choosing a career, finding a life partner, marriage, raising children, financial responsibilities, trying to stay healthy, retirement, finding ways to grow spiritually. Friends, all of this “normal” life can be exhausting.

Add to this any kind of challenge – the dreaded “C” word, mental illness, addiction, too much work, no work at all, teenagers, traffic on 85, not making the team, any kind of math – and life can seem impossible. But throw in a global pandemic, violence caused by reactions to racism and an election year. Still, the emotions that we are experiencing today may not even touch the emotions and challenges that the man in the story was faced with. What a blessing that have this story of brokenness being made whole.

We also have to admire the man for his courage and faith. He KNEW that he would not be welcomed in the synagogue. Also, life was not transient in Jesus’ day and it is likely that he had lived in this village all his life and EVERYONE knew he was a sinner. An outcast. But the man went any way.

And what does Jesus do? Well, being the Son of Man, he could see into the hearts of the Pharisees. He did not even WAIT for them to tempt him. It’s almost as if he was saying, “Na na na boo boo!” He asked the man to come forward and, simply with his words, restored the man to health. To his place in society. He gave him life again. Wholeness! Indeed, a miracle!

You see, Jesus knew that the world had turned upside down from his Father’s original intentions. The Law was not given arbitrarily or to make life hard. The chosen people had been rescued from slavery in Egypt for a reason. They were going to be wandering through the desert for 40 years on the way to the homeland and God wanted to use them to reach out to others and grow God’s kingdom, just like we are to do today.

God gave them the Law so when people saw the way they respected their God, each other and themselves they would say, “So THAT’S what it looks like to belong to Yahweh. Maybe I could get to know their God.” The Law was given as a tool of inclusion and the Pharisees had turned it into a measurement for judging worth. Worth in THEIR eyes, THEIR interpretations.

And Jesus was sent to restore the Law to its original intent and then add in the grace of God when mistakes are made. Forgiveness. Reconciliation. Wholeness.

And that is why this miracle story calls out to us today. It is not just about healing one man. Jesus *did* see the man's withered hand and, out of his compassion, wanted to heal him. To restore him. To give him a full life again,

But when Jesus looked into the hearts of the Pharisees, I believe he saw their withered hearts. "They were in a place of worship, and although I am sure their physical display was one of humility and worship, their whole attention was fixed on Jesus for the purpose of catching him breaking their law, so they could accuse him." (1) This kind of withered world that broke Jesus' heart.

And while life is extremely difficult for all of us right now, perhaps this miracle story can remind us that when our hearts are withered, our entire society can become withered too. And this is not God's hope, God's dream, God's plan for all that God has created!

You see, I chose to preach about miracles this summer because we all need to be reminded, especially right now, that our God is a God of miracles. And that we are called to trust God to do the right thing, in the right way, at the right time. A wise friend of mine recently said to me that if I am not trusting God then my God is not big enough! And it is my prayer that these miracles from our Holy Word will remind us all just how big our God is!

So let us take away from this story that our God, the Lord of the Sabbath, is offering wholeness, grace and true rest to anyone who comes to him. To all whose lives and hearts are withered by the illness, fear, addiction, or the powers of the world. That the Lord of the Sabbath is where we will find our rest, no matter what day it is. The God who created, redeems and sustains us can restore us to hope when our hearts are withered.

If any of us has a day when our hope is withering into pessimism, our faith is withering into cynicism and our hearts are withering into self-centered righteousness, let's give those hearts to the God of miracles for restoration and wholeness. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(1) "When Religion Loses Relationships", a sermon by Brad Bailey, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, February 25, 2019.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

Nazareth Presbyterian Church, August 2, 2020

God of abundant compassion and extravagant love, we join our hearts and voices in prayer to you, trusting your promise to hear and respond, not as we deserve, but as your mercy determines. When we look within ourselves, we are embarrassed by the many ways we fall short of delighting in your law. We heed the advice of the wicked without even recognizing we are neglecting your commandments. We hurt those closest to us, injure those whom you call us to be compassionate toward and dread the consequences of our own behavior. And yet, it is in those dark, lonely places that you appear and bless us, make of us new creations and reshape us for your divine purposes.

We praise you for your unwillingness to let us go and we cling to you now as we wrestle with the chaos within and around us. We rejoice that you are present right here in this place. God of healing, of exorcisms, of control over chaos, we come today like the crowds came to Jesus. Curious to see if you are really what you claim to be. We come in need of relief, fearful we do not have enough, eager to see Jesus face to face.

God of restoration, as we go from this place and back to our every day living, remind us that we have been blessed in order to be a blessing to others. In that recognition we remember those in our midst who are hungry. As this pandemic continues and many wrestle with unemployment, underemployment or dangerous employment, we pray that security in all its forms will come to those who are the most anxious about their well-being and that of those they love. We know that all around us your beloved children long for healing in body, mind or spirit. We know you see them with compassion and want for them abundant life. May we be instruments for Christ's power, embodying your love to all.

God of wholeness, we cannot count all the ways you come to us and give us that which we need. We revel in the beauty of creation. We relish the care of friends

and family. We enjoy the taste of food, the voice of a loved one, the familiar melodies of hymns and the everyday mercies that are new every morning. As we sing our praise and express our thanks, we ask you to empower us to participate in your compassionate care for all the earth and every creature upon it. We pray in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.