

**August 14, 2016**  
**TEXT: Mark 2:23–3:6**  
**TITLE: Hands of Faith**

There are some very active hands in today's gospel lesson. In the first story, there are the hands of the disciples rubbing grain together before eating it; the hands of Pharisees pointing in anger at them for breaking the Sabbath law against doing any work; and the hands of Jesus raised up defensively, protecting his disciples from these accusers. Can you picture that? Then, in the second story, there is the withered and useless hand of the man in the shadows of the synagogue, the outstretched hand of Jesus compelling that man to come stand front and center, and the hands hidden behind silent, crossed arms of religious leaders who not only disagree with this healing but now want to assassinate the healer. Can you picture that as well?

Think about your hands for a moment and ask yourself, "Where would I put my hands in these two stories? Where do I see myself?" More than likely, we see ourselves somewhere close to Jesus' hands—huddled protectively behind him or standing near to Jesus as he performs a healing in the synagogue. We're on Jesus' team! So we clap our hands or rub them together in glee, imagining that we're going to have front row seats as those bad religious legalists are taken down a notch or two for their excessive piety. Don't they know that we are to follow the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law? Don't they know it is always better to do good rather than harm on the Sabbath? With our hands we pat ourselves on the back and say, Boy, there's nothing worse than religious extremists—in fact, there's nothing worse than extremists of all types: religious, moral, political. Thank goodness we can stand here by Jesus' side as he lets those self-righteous folk have it!

Yet why are we so quick to assume we're huddled beside Jesus? Aren't we the ones in church? Aren't we pious Presbyterians seeking to take seriously the demands of our faith? We've more in common with the religious establishment in these stories than with the renegade rabbi from Nazareth. Maybe we need to remember the number of times our hands have pointed angrily at someone else, the number of times our arms have been crossed in disgust at someone else. Maybe the question is this: How does any person of faith reach a point in which easing someone's hunger or healing someone's wound feels like a bad thing? If we have any hope of avoiding the sins of the self-righteous, and of reducing the extremism active in our hearts and in our culture, we need to stand beside those folks whose hands were clenched in anger toward Jesus that day long ago.

A change in perspective is actually a very good thing. Let me give two quick examples. Back in 1920, the first Band-Aids were produced and sold in America. Now, you may think that the main purpose of a Band-Aid is to cover cuts, scrapes and wounds to keep the damaged area clean. That's partially true, but Band-Aids also heal emotions. Give kids a Band-Aid after vaccinations and

suddenly tears magically stop flowing. The dreaded shot is over. Emotional, not physical, healing happens first. That fact makes us see Band-Aids in a different way. Second, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote a powerful book called “Between the World and Me” aimed at helping his son understand what it means to grow up African American in America today. In the first few pages he wrote these words: *Americans believe in the reality of “race” as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows from this inalterable condition...But race is the child of racism, not the father. The process of naming [races] has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy.*<sup>1</sup> Instead of believing race is a given, Coates reminds us that race is a construct, something created and taught and codified by those who “believe themselves to be white” as a way to maintain privilege in the cultural hierarchy. Race is the child of racism, not its father. That fact makes us see society in a different way.

Now let’s go back to our earlier question: How does a person of faith get to a point in which easing hunger or healing a wound feels like a bad thing? It happens easier than you might think. It happens whenever something is placed between ourselves and those who stand before us so that our vision is distorted and a barrier is erected that our hands can’t break through. Story #1: The Sabbath laws were, and remain, important to the Jews because they are part of how they honor God and God’s creation by stopping work one day a week. In a world that would push people 24/7, a voice of faith asks us to slow down, to rest and care for ourselves and one another on the Sabbath. But to paraphrase Ta-Nehisi Coates, honoring the Sabbath is the child of our faith, not its father. Sabbath observance – going against the dominant voice of non-stop capitalism— is the child of what we believe and value; it was never meant to be the father of faith, the definer of who’s “in” and who’s “out.”

It’s similar in Story #2: The man with the withered hand could not work or take part in society in a meaningful way. In the world’s eyes, he was damaged goods and needed to stay on the margins of life. But in the synagogue that day, Jesus called the man front and center. Jesus basically said that any space meant for worship cannot be a space divided into places of power and places of oppression. There are no sidelines or cheap seats in the house of God. If you can’t recognize that when you step inside God’s temple, then the problem is with your eyesight and not with the architecture.

Christian writer Henri Nouwen has said that healing is a type of hospitality. It’s not about getting well as much as it is about first feeling welcome—feeling able to step forward into a space where you’ll be respected, listened to, and treated with humanity. Healers are hosts as much as doctors. That is why Jesus called the man forward, something no one had thought to do for him. It changed his life and his hand forever.

As all of you are well-aware, we have a big church. Every day people come in the open doors off Highland Avenue. Some come in and just want to walk around. Some come in to meet with a group. Some come in and need advice or help or prayer. Every single person on our staff ministers to these guests—the pastors, the security team, the housekeepers, the administrative assistants and staff. Yet at times the question is asked: In today’s world, should our doors be open? Shouldn’t we buzz in people through intercoms? Lots of churches and businesses do that. But how many would never come inside ELPC if our doors were closed? How many would never find a safe space for their story or their prayer if security trumped hospitality?

It’s messy. Sabbath keeping is good. Churches are special. But both of them are outgrowths of faith, not the parents and criteria of faith. So to finally answer our question for today: We can only get to a place where easing hunger or healing a wound can feel like a bad thing if we have decided something other than God is God of our life. Something like power or safety. Something like personal comfort or class privilege. There’s a name for these things - they’re called “idols” and false gods. And if keeping the Sabbath is Commandment #4 of the Ten Commandments, don’t forget commandments #1 & #2 that say: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me. Nor shall you make for yourself an idol, bowing down to them, or worshipping them.*

Life is messy. There are races and ethnicities that we’ve created, named and prioritized for all the wrong reasons. There are assumptions we quickly jump to based on someone’s appearance, clothing, accent, or the political sign in their front yard. There are times we harm others when we should carve out safe spaces for healing. There are moments we look on in silence from behind crossed arms when we should listen and act with humility and grace. The hard truth is that we can’t make the world different than it is. That’s why God came into this messy world. That’s why Christ takes the initiative—answering those who accuse, and calling us forward with our withered hands and twisted souls.

All of this is to say: Keep an eye on your hands in the coming days. Use these bible stories as your guide. Are your hands busy reaping and blindly eating of the world’s harvest? Are they pointing at someone else in accusation? Are they withered and gnarled, anxiously hiding in the shadows? Are they clenched and crossed, refusing to open when confronted by an obvious need? Or can our hands learn from Christ’s hands—the ones he raised in defense of clueless disciples, the ones that called forth a man from the shadows that he might be welcomed and made whole? Watch what your hands do each day and practice Christ’s gestures whenever you can. Let your hands of faith guide and teach your heart of faith. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me, 2015, p. 7.