

# The Man with the Withered Hand

## Mark 3:1-6

### 2nd Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

June 03, 2018

What is it like to experience a story of healing? When does healing happen and how do we recognize it? Does healing require a recognizable change in the body to count, or is it really about something else?

The healing of the man with the withered hand in today's gospel from Mark is one that happens so quickly that it is almost lost in the greater drama that surrounds it. The scene is a synagogue, a place of teaching and worship. The attention-grabbing characters - the law-loving Pharisees and the power-craving Herodians - have been trailing Jesus and his disciples, a chorus of judges waiting for Jesus to make a mistake that they would be most happy to hold against him. These strange bedfellows - usually political opponents - found it expedient to work together when it came to undermining the authority and credibility of the one they both perceived as a threat: the One called the Messiah.

The prelude to the healing involves these enemies of Jesus trailing after his followers through the fields and the town to get to the synagogue. The Pharisees had caught the disciples plucking the heads off the grain as they walked through the fields - probably more an absent-minded reflex like chewing on a blade of grass than a deliberate attempt to glean the fields for a meal. This did not keep the Pharisees from accusing them of harvesting on the Sabbath - a *gotcha* they wasted no time laying on Jesus.

Neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians cared much about people, about the human condition. The Pharisees reveled in righteous indignation at this itinerant preacher with his crazy ideas about loving enemies and blessing the ragtag army of the unclean who followed him around. The power hungry Herodians merely capitalized on an opportunity to use one enemy to combat another. From Jesus, with his inner radar set to detect manipulation, and to care about every sheep in the pasture, every lamb in the fold, came exasperation in facing community leaders behaving badly - their hardness of heart breaking his own.

Within the crowd of extras listening to the drama, there would have been many kinds of people, each with his or her own special need for healing. One was a man with a withered hand. This unnamed man would have kept a low profile - keeping his deformed hand safely hidden inside his long-sleeved garment. *Withered* implies some long-standing insult, possibly a congenital malformation, perhaps an accident of birthing, or a terrible trauma which he somehow survived without succumbing to secondary infection. A source of chronic pain - both physical and emotional - his withered hand would have set him apart, confining him to the shadows - not just in that room but throughout his whole life, long ago having learned that he belonged in isolation

as punishment for some unnamed sin for which there was no recourse. With a status as low and unclean as a tax collector or prostitute, his stepping into the limelight as the center of attention - much less into the synagogue at all - would have meant crossing a boundary of decency that should have been off limits to him and his kind.

It is not difficult to recognize and feel compassion for the pain and suffering of biblical characters living with the shame and blame of their own afflictions in ancient times. Imagining ourselves in the world Jesus lived in, we easily align ourselves with his anger at those who would make outcasts of others whose illness made them unclean.

Yet, are attitudes about illness and death very different in our day and time? We would like to think that in the centuries after the Enlightenment, we would have evolved. Knowledge about diseases of the body and mind - down to the biologic and physiologic drivers from the cell to its genetic code - begets power, and with enough human drive and determination, any insult can be fixed, any disability accommodated, any threat to life and limb overcome. Or so we want to believe. Yet, are we *really* free of fear of becoming helplessly ill? Are we really above assigning subliminal blame to the ill and dying - in an all-too-human attempt to distance ourselves from the same thing happening to us?

Believing in our power to conquer sickness and death, leaving no stone unturned, we seek well-trained professional help when we get sick, and know that medicines and sometimes surgery will be offered to keep us going. When our organs fail, we accommodate their work for us by using machines to accomplish their tasks. And when we are unable to keep living even with other people's organs, when death seems inevitable, we can choose to have our bodies frozen, hoping that in some future time we can be thawed out and cured of an insult that was incurable in our own lifetime. Our metaphor to defeat insult and conquer death is one of war, where every day of life at any cost is considered a battle victory: no challenge too great, no obstacle too overwhelming. It is not even much of a stretch to think that a man with a withered hand could be swept from our world into a galaxy far, far away, to be given a replacement mechanical hand, as good as new - just like Luke Skywalker. Waiting for healing to come in some after-life has no appeal at all.

From our context of living in a hubris-laden world of medical miracles, we understandably wrestle with the healing miracles of Jesus. Because what we like to refer to as the "best medical care system in the world" cannot really fix everything - despite our desires and expectations - and because we continue to fear we will die before we are ready, we hedge our bets and pray for miracles. In my medical career, I have occasionally known patients with unexplained resolution of disease and hold those stories in a sacred place of mystery, where the unexplained remains unexplained. What is certain is that not everyone gets a miracle. More often than not, a withered hand stays withered, forsaken.

What if the miracle of Jesus were about something else - something more - beyond a back-up plan, beyond a drop of magic landing on those who earned it by some inherent goodness or deep belief or fervent prayer? What if the power in miracle is meant to be more than just a reset button - a do-over - to take us to a place before we were sick or traumatized, as if it had never happened?

Though sometimes done before witnesses for a specific purpose - such as to show it was more important to heal than to pick apart behaviors on the Sabbath - Jesus often healed in private, and frequently asked witnesses *not* to tell anyone about what he had done. Not just opportunities to show off, healing miracles demonstrated the power of God; more importantly they demonstrated his compassion and his willingness to cross the boundaries between clean and unclean, worthy and unworthy. He spoke to, touched, loved, and wept with those who were healed - not just from disease, but also from isolation and shame inflicted upon them by those who put rules over people.

Jesus broke the rules to heal people, to restore them to a fullness of life denied by their afflictions. He did not use healing as a weapon against his enemies, nor did he dispense healing like magic from a distance that would keep him untainted. Jesus entered into the suffering of others - a response not of pity, but of empathy - and this is how healing happened, even to the man with the withered hand. Out of sadness and anger at the world's hardness of heart came abundant love to heal the withered hand and to transform the man's life with abundant courage and resilience and promise and hope, bringing him out of the shadows and into the light.

It is in this healing movement of Jesus - not just from Galilee to Jerusalem but in his turning from appeasement of the powerful towards solidarity with the suffering - that we are saved, that we are all healed. By this great and holy mystery, even the fear of illness and death, which sends us fleeing from the suffering of others, can be transformed by the cross - less a symbol of death and destruction and more one of sacrificial healing and restoration. By the power of Jesus to turn rejection, betrayal and hardness of heart into compassion, we are healed. By his wounds we are healed. All that is needed is for us to step out of the shadows and to stretch out our hand. Amen.

*Let us pray.*

Holy God, in the light of your Resurrection, pour out your healing over our pain, our grief, our isolation, and our failure to trust your presence in sickness and in health, in living and in dying. Give us the courage to follow Jesus across boundaries into solidarity with the suffering, and to hold out our hands always for your deeply mysterious and holy gift of restoration. Amen.