Things that Matter: Stretching Out Your Hand

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

Mark 2: 23 – 3:6

What are the foundations of your faith? What are your practices of faith that you feel compelled to follow?

Throughout the history of the Old Testament one of the defining marks of that people was to keep Sabbath. Sabbath was the 7th day of the week. Keeping it sprang from the creation story – on the 7th day God rested – and the time holy. That’s what Sabbath rest is about – making time holy. That is why the Jewish community calls Saturday the Sabbath.

When the children of Israel received the law from Moses when he went up on Mt Sinai, we remember what we call the 4th commandment:

*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.*

But there is more:

*9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.* [Exodus 20: 8-11]

As Christians we have made a variation on sabbath. Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill is – as he said in the Sermon on the Mount [Mt 5:17]. Christians have since the time of the resurrection marked the first day of the week aside as a holy day. Sunday is often called the Christian Sabbath.

The Jewish practice by the time of Jesus had led to all sorts of rules to follow about how to observe this holy time. One regulation was not to harvest on the Sabbath. Jesus’ disciples picked some grain as they walked along one sabbath day. They ran afoul of the religious leaders. The Jesus conducted a healing – and the same leaders said that was not right to do then as well.

Jesus understood – and we can see as well – that those who opposed these particular acts were not just trying to create a holy space and time. They were opposed to something else. They were opposed to the way that Jesus challenged them.

They had all the answers in the law – or so they thought. But Jesus was saying that there is something deeper in a relationship with God than just following a set of rules and regulations. Jesus said to the man who needed his hand healed – *stretch out your hand*.

Flex your fingers. Extend them out. Now draw them in. Do it again. Do you feel that? That is the life you have been given. Some of us when we stretch out our hands may feel power surge through us. Others of us may feel some pain. But we all feel something. Jesus said *Stretch out your hand* to show that God’s power offers hope. God’s hand in Jesus met this man’s hand. And he received something he needed.

Sometimes stretching out our hand creates some discomfort – maybe even pain.

My father was a physician, a urologist, and a Christian. We had a number of conversations about Jesus and healing. But it was only after his death that I learned this story: A woman came to him with a recurring problem of infection. Nothing worked. She was recently married – after her first husband had died. And her new husband had been a widower as well. Both thought it was important to honor their previous spouse. In fact, her new husband had a portrait of his first wife that hung on the mantle where the new wife saw it every day.

When my father learned this, he told the husband to take the portrait of his first wife down. He did. And the woman never had those infections again.

The man was attempting to show his love and respect for his first wife. But in so doing he was literally making his second wife sick. It is not that he did not love his first wife, but something had changed.

In worship today there is a lot going on – we are coming from different places and going to a whole lot of places. Youth and adults are departing for Montreat. Elders are being ordained and installed. And we are sharing communion.

Even as we do this we need to give thanks for what has gone before. We need to thank those generations that have made places like Montreat possible. We need to thank those who are just concluding their term as elders as well as the host of the faithful who have served here as well as through the church in this way. And we need to recall that a hallmark of communion is remembering – Do this in remembrance of me – not to focus on what has been. But – Do this in remembrance of me – to prepare us for what is to come.

Jesus asks us to stretch out our hands – no matter their condition – to connect with God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we may share the bounty of life God has offered. When we do that we will find that we are empowered – and we are changed.

To those going to Montreat, stretch out your hands so that you might receive the wonder of what has been prepared for you.

To those who have been to Montreat or some other special retreat time, stretch out your hand so that you might find a renewal of God’s blessing.

To those who will be ordained and installed as elders, stretch out your hands so you might share what God has given you with your gifts of leadership.

To those who have been ordained but are not serving in a particular church calling at the moment, stretch out your hand to know the wonder of rest and the privilege of preparation for another time of service.

To all of us as share the power of communion, stretch out your hands that in receiving these simple elements you have the sustenance of God’s gifts. Know that God’s love is constant. As we find it, we are fulfilled in ways we may not expect – yet which will bear the fruits of God’s grace.

Stretch out your hands. Thanks be to God.

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