

The Healing of the Man With the Withered Hand

A Children's Talk by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith
Bryn Athyn Church Community Worship Service - May 5, 2024

- We're talking today about hands.
 - Can you find your hands and wiggle your fingers?
 - Parents and adults, you can do this too.
 - Hands are such amazing tools that the Lord gave us!
- But, in the story that we're going to read today, someone's hand has stopped working.
 - And we'll see whether the Lord can help them

- *And it came to pass on another Sabbath, that He entered into the synagogue and taught; and there was a man there, and his right hand was withered. (Luke 6:6)*
 - The man had a withered hand – it was dried up, like a withered plant.
 - Can you pretend like your right hand is withered?
 - Keep it that way for a little bit – if you want, even until we read the part of the story where the Lord heals it.
 - Imagine trying to do basic tasks with a withered hand:
 - Putting on your shoes; eating food; drawing a picture or writing.
 - It would be pretty hard to have a withered hand.

- *And the scribes and Pharisees watched Him closely, whether He would cure on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against Him. But He knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand, "Arise, and stand there in the midst." And standing up he stood there. Then Jesus said to them, "I will ask you: Is it permitted on the Sabbath to do good, or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:7-9)*
 - The scribes and Pharisees did not care about the man being healed; they were just watching to see whether Jesus would heal him on the Sabbath day.
 - The Lord wanted them to know that it was good to help people, even on the Sabbath day.

- *And looking around at them all, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so; and his hand was restored as whole as the other. And they were filled with mindless rage, and talked with one another about what they might do to Jesus. (Luke 6:10,11)*
- Now, stretch out your hand, like the Lord told the man.
 - Isn't that so much better?
 - What a miracle that the Lord could do that for the man!

- Did you notice how the scribes and Pharisees felt about the man being healed?
 - They were filled with anger! They were so mad!
 - They thought it was bad that the Lord had healed the man, because it was the Sabbath day.

- When we are thinking about reaching out, part of what can wither our hands or make it harder for us to reach out is wondering what other people will think of us.
 - "If I reach out, will I do it wrong?"
 - "If I reach out, what will people think of me."
 - Because sometimes when we reach out, things go badly.

- Let's do a silly example of this.
 - Have you ever tried to give someone a high five and they think you want a hug?
 - Have you ever tried to reach out to shake somebody's hand and they go for a fist bump?
 - Let's try that with the person next to you.
 - How do you feel after you have one of those awkward interactions?
 - Like shriveling up inside and never reaching out again?
 - Yeah, and it can be even harder with other kinds of interactions.
 - You can see that someone is having a hard time and you try to say something to make them feel better and they yell at you because it's not what they wanted.
 - We want to shrivel up inside.
 - Or you reach out to ask for help and somebody says no.
 - We want to shrivel up inside.

- But, it's through trying to reach out that we learn how to do it better.
 - The Lord can help us learn what to do in different situations.
 - For example, you can make it clear what you're going for by saying, "Fist bump!" Or "I want to shake your hand!"
 - And you can learn from other times of offering help or asking for help what works and doesn't work.
 - Sometimes it's learning about that specific person – what works for them.
 - Or sometimes it's learning what *not* to say when offering help or what *not* to do.
 - We can learn how to offer help without trying to control the person.
 - We can learn how to ask for help without trying to make the other person feel guilty for not already helping us.

- We all will have times of feeling withered and the Lord can heal us and help us stretch out our hands to ask for help and stretch out our hands to offer help.
 - Now let's stretch out both of our hands, and then fold them, and say a prayer to the Lord together.

- Amen.

Prayer

- Lord, thank You for our hands. Thank You for making it so that we can do all sorts of useful things with our hands. Help us when we feel withered to reach out to You for help. Amen.

Reaching Out

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Introduction

- When someone reaches out to us and they are the right person, at the right time, reaching out in the right way it can make such a difference!
 - We feel seen, we feel not alone in the universe, we feel lifted up, even as we may be carrying an awful lot on our shoulders.
- And so the main thing I would hope you would come away with from this talk is encouragement and motivation to reach out – to reach out to *offer* help, to reach out to *ask for* help from other people, and to reach out to ask for help from the Lord.
 - The Lord can help you to reach out in each of those ways.
- And I also think it could be useful for us to grapple with some of what makes reaching out difficult.
 - “Just reach out more – always!” is not useful advice.
 - There are legitimate reasons why we might hesitate to reach out and, if those of us who are prone to overthinking are going to be able to push ourselves to reach out, then we need to talk through some of these issues so that we can have a better sense of what the Lord is and is not calling us to do.

Outline

- We’ll talk about this in 3 parts:
 - Part 1: Why the man’s hand was withered.
 - Part 2: Why the Lord tells us to cut off our hands.
 - Part 3: How the Lord can heal our witheredness and help us to reach out in the right way.

1) Why the Man’s Hand Was Withered

- Why was there a man with a withered hand in the synagogue that the Lord came into on that particular Sabbath day?
- The Lord healed thousands and thousands of people and we only hear the individual stories of a pretty small percentage of the total number of people that He healed.
 - There’s a reason why we have this story of the man with the withered hand.
 - The teachings of the New Church tell us that every time the Lord healed someone’s physical problem it signified Him healing some spiritual problem – it was a *natural* manifestation of the *spiritual* healing that the Lord was bringing to people through His coming into the world (*Secrets of Heaven* 7337, 8364:6).
 - In this particular case, the man with a withered hand in the synagogue signified the state of the people at that time who had been withered in their ability to do good.

- When the Lord asked them, "Is it permitted on the Sabbath to do good?" they probably would have nervously answered, "No?"
 - They did have strong commands in the Old Testament to do no work on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11; 31:13-17), including not even kindling a fire (Exodus 35:3).
 - So we can understand people feeling hesitant about taking actions on the Sabbath.
 - By the time the Lord came on earth, there was a list of over 1,500 activities that Jewish leaders had decided should not be done on the Sabbath. (See "Exploring the Meaning of Matthew 12" by Ray and Star Silverman at newchristianbiblestudy.org/exposition/translation/inner-meaning-of-matthew-12.)
 - People had lost all sight of the original intention behind the commandment to remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.
 - As a result, people's ability to reach out to offer help or reach out to receive help on the Sabbath had withered.
- The Lord had come into the world to fix this and many other instances where the people had gotten a twisted understanding of what the Lord wanted.
 - The Lord Jesus Christ was and still is the Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5) – the one in charge of what should happen on the Sabbath – and He *taught* people what the Sabbath was actually for and He also *showed* them what it was for by His actions.
 - Listen to this passage from the teachings of the New Church:
 - When the Lord came into the world,... the Sabbath day was turned into a day for instruction in divine things, for rest from labors, for meditating on things related to salvation and eternal life, and for loving our neighbor. The fact that the Sabbath day turned into a day for loving our neighbor is clear from what the Lord did and taught on that day. (*True Christianity* 301)
- He was showing the people back then and us today that we do need a Sabbath Day: we do need a weekly day of rest from our labors – a day to be taught about divine things and for meditating on salvation, and also a day for loving our neighbor.
 - It is OK to reach out to people on the Sabbath.

Why Were They Filled With Rage?

- But, when the Lord did that good thing of healing the man's hand on that Sabbath day, the scribes and the Pharisees were "filled with mindless rage" and started to talk about how they might destroy Him (Luke 6:11; Matthew 12:14).
 - They were out of their minds with rage about what Jesus had done.
 - We might be confused by the intensity of their reaction – why were they so apoplectic about this?
 - Well, Jesus was, by implication, claiming to be God.
 - It turns out that He was God but you can understand why people who didn't buy that didn't like Him making that claim.

- But another way of seeing this rage-filled response is as the reaction of the hells to the Lord coming to dislodge them.
 - We know that evil spirits had possessed a bunch of people at the time of the Lord's coming.
 - They had also possessed the thinking of a lot more people to the point where the hells had so twisted people's understanding of what the Lord's Word meant, that they had succeeded in making people believe that the religious thing to do was to *not* help other people.
 - And the Lord was coming along and calling that a lie.
 - He was saying, "No. That's not true. That's not what the Sabbath is about. The Sabbath is about resting in the Lord and loving your neighbor."
 - And hell was not pleased by the Lord doing that.
 - And so hell inspired people to try to destroy the Lord.
- That's pretty dark, pretty intense, and pretty useful to know that, even today, hell is going to try to use religious teachings to convince you *not* to reach out to other people.
- But, part of what makes this all tricky is that *the Lord* is also going to use religious teachings to try to get you to *not* reach out to other people, at least not in certain ways.
 - This brings us to the second part of this talk: why the Lord tells us to cut off our hands.

2) Why the Lord Tells Us to Cut Off Our Hands

- The Lord healed the man with the withered hand but He also said things like this:
 - "And if either your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having either two hands or two feet, to be cast into the eternal fire" (Matthew 18:8).
- It seems that most people understand that the Lord was not meaning this instruction to be taken literally or a whole lot more of us should be going around with missing feet and hands.
 - But, if the Lord didn't mean for this to be taken literally, what did He mean for us to take away from it?
 - The teachings of the New Church explain that the "eternal fire" that the Lord warns people about being cast into means "the craving of self-love and materialism" (otherwise known as love of self and love of the world) and the things that go along with these loves which include "contempt for others, enmity and hostility toward people who do not support us, envy, hatred, and vengefulness; and savagery and cruelty as a result.... [and also] denial and a consequent contempt, derision, and blasphemy of the sacred values of the church" (*Heaven and Hell* 570).
 - That is the same fire, by the way, that was symbolized by the fires that the children of Israel were not supposed to kindle on the Sabbath day.
 - If we are getting caught up in selfish loves, then there's no way that we're going to be keeping the Sabbath day holy.
- And so to cut off your hand or foot that causes you to stumble means to cut out of your life any taking action motivated by those hellish loves.
 - You might sometimes feel kind of lame or maimed and like you don't know what to do with yourself, but that's a whole lot better than taking an action that is going to cause harm.

- The question for us then becomes, when I'm feeling resistance to reaching out, is that
 - A) because hell is trying to keep me from doing something good
 - or is it B) because the Lord is trying to keep me from doing something harmful?
- Here is a challenging and also very helpful passage on the topic:
 - Good deeds are evil deeds if impulses of self-love and materialism are not removed. When we do good deeds before removing those impulses, the deeds do look good on the outside, but they are evil on the inside. We do them for the sake of reputation, or material advantage, or position, or to be repaid, so they are either self-righteous or hypocritical. The urges of self-love and materialism make them so. When these evils are removed, however, the deeds become good. Then they are the goodness of charity. No consideration of self, worldly advantages, reputation, or reward enters into them, so they are not self-righteous or hypocritical. Heavenly love and spiritual love then flow from the Lord into the deeds and cause them to be love and charity in action. (*Secrets of Heaven* 3147:7)
 - Good deeds are evil deeds if we haven't done the work to remove selfish, hellish loves.
 - It's not about how good the actions look on the outside; it's about where they're coming from on the inside.
 - It's easy to see the truth of this teaching.
 - We know that there are times when people have reached out to us, in theory to help us, but it just ends up feeling like they're trying to control us.
 - And we also know that we have each done things that may have looked good to other people but actually were coming from a self-serving place.
- If we're not careful, the hells will use these ideas to wither our hands – to keep us from doing anything.
 - They'll say to us, "Hey! You might be doing that for a selfish reason, better to not do it!"
 - So let's get into part 3 of this talk and explore how the Lord can heal our witheredness and help us to reach out in the right way.

3) How the Lord Can Heal Our Witheredness and Help Us to Reach Out

- The hells would love to trap us in a false dichotomy.
- One bad option seems to be to get stuck in overanalyzing all the options of what we could do and trying to sort through endless mixed motives that we might have.
 - And if we're looking at ourselves closely enough we will always be able to find selfish motivations for everything we might do.
 - And in that sort of mood, religious teachings can just be another tool to overanalyze and find fault with ourselves.
- The other bad option that seems to be before us is to throw all of that thinking out the window and just act.
 - To think, "I don't need any of those religious ideas, I'm just going to ignore my conscience and do what feels right." That's a bad approach too.

- The third option is to invite the Lord to guide our thinking and our actions.
 - In the story the Lord told the man to arise and stand in the midst and he did so.
 - When we're thinking about what to do, are we willing to get up and stand in the midst, waiting for the Lord to tell us what to do?
 - It's a useful image to picture because there's a vulnerability in that image – there we are standing in front of everyone.
 - It takes courage to stand there in front of everyone and in front of the Lord.
 - It takes courage to stand before the Lord and ask Him to guide our thinking and our actions.
- The Lord can help us to see how religious teachings can help us to do a better job of reaching out.
 - So many of the Lord's teachings are about how to love and serve our neighbors.
 - The Lord didn't give us those teachings to keep us from acting but to help us act in a useful way.
- The Lord said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And the man did and it says that "his hand was restored as whole as the other."
 - In the Word, the left hand often symbolizes things to do with truth and understanding and the right hand often symbolizes things to do with goodness and the will (*Secrets of Heaven* 9604).
 - The fact that the man's left hand was already whole suggests that he had plenty of truths already; what he needed was the goodness to go with those truths – he needed help from the Lord in knowing how to apply those truths.
 - He didn't need his left hand to be withered and to get rid of the truths he knew.
 - He needed his right hand to be restored as whole as his left hand.
- The Lord can help us to do this – to use the knowledge that we have to reach out in better ways, in less selfish ways, in wiser ways, in more genuinely helpful ways.
- It's profound to think that the man's hand was restored in the act of reaching out.
 - How will our ability to reach out be restored? As we do the work to reach out.
 - It's a bit of a paradox but it's true.

We Are Going to Mess Up

- It's worth remembering and acknowledging that, even with the Lord guiding us, we are still going to mess up a whole lot and other people are still going to mess up a whole lot.
- At the beginning I talked about how it can make such a difference when the right person reaches out at the right time, in the right way but that's an awfully high bar.
 - We're going to miss on at least one of those a lot of the time.
 - We might be the right person to reach out and we do it in the right way but we happen to pick the wrong time and so the way we reach out doesn't seem like it worked.
 - We're also going to do things that we think are being helpful which are actually kind of controlling or patronizing.
 - We're going to not ask for help in times when we should have asked for help.
 - We're going to reject help that we should have taken.
 - We're going to overthink things sometimes and we're going to underthink things sometimes.
 - We're going to hurt people and other people are going to hurt us.

- And we're also going to have plenty of times where we're not clear whether we did the right thing or not because it's just too hard to tell.
 - How many times have you sent a text and not received a response for a long time and then wondered if you did something wrong?
- Every bad, difficult, or ambiguous experience could be something that withers us – that causes us to retreat further into ourselves and not want to reach out to other people anymore.
- Or the Lord can help us to use those experiences to learn and get better.
 - Part of how the Lord can help us to have the courage to stand up in the midst and stretch out our withered hand again is through His teachings about what we can do when we mess up.
 - We can acknowledge when we've been selfish.
 - We can admit when we said or did something ignorant or uncaring.
 - We can seek forgiveness and we can offer forgiveness to other flawed people.
- If you think of any close relationship that you have, it works and is good not because neither of you in the relationship have ever messed up but because you have kept working on it, trying to continue to reach out to the other person in better ways and trying to respond when they reach out to you.
 - You can have the courage to reach out not because you know you're going to do it perfectly but because you can know that the Lord can help you make it right, if and when you mess up.

Conclusion

- In the end, the reason why the man with the withered hand could reach out his hand was because the Lord did a miracle.
 - The man could reach out in a way that he couldn't before because of the Lord's love and because of the Lord's power.
- The only reason that any of us can reach out to offer help or to ask for help is because of the Lord's love and the Lord's power.
 - He offers that love to you freely so that your efforts to reach out can become "love and charity in action."
- Today, is a Sabbath day – how might the Lord help you reach out and love your neighbor today?
 - Who might you reach out to? How might you do it? When might you do it?
 - Or how might you reach out to ask for help? What kind of help do you need?
 - If someone reaches out to you to offer help, will you be able to receive it and not turn it away?
- The Lord is telling you to arise, stand there in the midst, and stretch out your hand.
 - And because the Lord is telling you to do it, you can do it.
- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.