

Stretching Forth a Withered Hand
Mark 3:1-6

Rev. Dr. Mark E. Yurs
Salem United Church of Christ
March 7, 2021

He . . . said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.
Mk. 3:5

Our selection this morning from Mark's gospel presents us with the case of a man with a weakness in one of his hands. Jesus restores that man's weak hand to its full strength.

There are several theological trails in this story which we could follow, but let's stick with what the man with the withered hand experienced.

Let this man's withered hand call to our minds what is withered in us so that when we see him on the sacred page we are moved to say, "That's me!"

A play was staged in Paris in 1918. The play told the story of Louis Pasteur, the famed biologist noted for discovering the principles behind vaccinations and what makes them work. There was a scene in the play that had the Pasteur character inoculating a little boy. While that was happening on stage, there was a middle aged man in the audience straining forward as best he could to eagerly hear and see what the actors were doing. Afterwards this middle aged man explained why he was pressing forward. "That was me!" he exclaimed. "I was the first boy saved by Pasteur!"¹

So I want you now to be able to lean forward into this text from Mark and say of the man with the withered hand, "That's me! I am that man! His experience is mine!"

There are four aspects of this man's experience that capture my attention. There is the withered hand itself; there is the hiding of the withered hand; there is the healing of the withered hand; and there is the strength that comes to the withered hand.

The withered hand

The exact malady this man in the text suffered is unknown. William Barclay, noted Scottish New Testament scholar, teaches that the Greek verb here translated as *withered* implies that he was not born with this affliction; it came upon him later in life. And Barclay goes on to say there is a legend which indicates the man had been a stone mason by profession and the withering that came upon him severely hindered his ability to work.² In any case, that withered hand, whenever its onset, must have impacted this man's life negatively both economically and emotionally.

¹ Andrew W. Blackwood, *This Year of Our Lord* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1943), p. 81.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark Daily Study Bible Series*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 67.

The Bible is full of people with some withering malady of one form or another. Perhaps the most famous is the Apostle Paul who suffered that terrible thorn in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7ff). For Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night, the withering thing in his life was his age; he thought he was too old to benefit from anything new (Jn. 3:1ff). The Old Testament character Gideon was a young man with a withering problem. Gideon's withering problem was his nation: it was defeated, deflated, demoralized, and still quite in danger (Jdgs. 6:11ff). Another Old Testament character beset with a withering difficulty was Abigail. The withered thing in Abigail's life was her marriage to that churlish man Nabal (1 Sam. 25:3).

We can be fairly certain that some listening to this sermon online or over television look upon life as they live and see some withering malady that troubles their days. For one person the withering malady may be their finances – their source of income has atrophied, their bank account has shriveled, they wonder how they are going to make ends meet and hold things together. For another the thing that has withered in their life could be their sense of purpose – once they occupied a role that brought them fulfillment, but now that role is gone and they are left wonder who they are now and who they are supposed to be. Someone else may have a diminished and failed sense of direction – they used to know what the right thing to do was, but now their conviction is less clear; they are betwixt and between as to the alternatives, at sixes and sevens. For more than a few of you, the withered thing may be your spiritual life – your prayers seem to fall flat and your faith feels small and ineffective.

We are never as we would like to be. So I take it that you have reason to look at that man in our text and say, "That's me! There is something withered in my life, too!"

The hiding of the withered hand

The man in our text hid his withered hand. I say that because Jesus called him forward (3:3). That must mean he was not toward the front; he was keeping back somehow. He was in the synagogue, to be sure, in public, but he may have been conscious that people were looking at him and staring. Mark says the Pharisees certainly were (3:2). I imagine most everyone in the gathered congregation that day knew this man and knew he had his malady; but I also suspect he did not want to be a spectacle. Jesus had to call him forward. He was keeping himself discreetly hidden in the back.

It is not unusual for people to keep their troubles hidden. One of the heroes of the American Revolution was a man by the name of Henry Knox, a rather rotund bookseller who became an expert in artillery and much relied upon by the Continental Army. Sometime back in Henry Knox's young manhood he suffered an accidental gunshot wound that tore off two fingers from his left hand. Ever after, whenever he was in public, Henry Knox kept his wounded hand wrapped in a handkerchief.³

Kaiser Wilhelm II, the last of the German emperors, was born with one arm shorter and weaker than the other. He did all he could to conceal his withered arm, especially when posing for pictures or paintings.⁴

³ David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p. 58.

⁴ "Wilhelm II, German Emperor," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_II,_German_Emperor. Accessed March 1, 2021.

Or, if you do not care for those historical illustrations, you may prefer one from Jim Carrey's movie about the Grinch. You may remember that when the Grinch was in school he gave himself a haircut that left him embarrassed. When he went to school the next day, he had a paper bag over his head. When the teacher asked him to remove the bag, he had his feet up on his desk so we still could not see his head. When the teacher instead he put his feet down, he had a book propped up, still covering his face and head.

No one likes to be a spectacle. One of my professors said that people often hide their true selves when they come to church. He said people go to church often feeling like hell. And he defined hell as "standing out in the cold carrying our burdens alone."⁵

Perhaps that is you. And perhaps you can look at that man in our text and say, "That's me! I have something in my life that is withered and I am trying to hide it."

The healing of the withered hand

I wonder how many of you watch *Dr. Pimple Popper* on television. "Dr. Pimple Popper" is Dr. Sandra Lee, a dermatologist. The show is about people who come to Dr. Lee with large growths or bumps on their bodies. The growths are sometimes quite painful and often grotesque. The people with them are ashamed and keep them hidden as best they can. Relief does not come to any of these people until they expose their affliction to Dr. Lee. There is no healing in the hiddenness.

There is a psalmist who reports his health withered as long as he kept something hidden. His strength returned only after he opened up about it (Ps. 32:3, 5).

And so Jesus, the Great Physician, says to the man in our text, "Stretch out your hand." That is when the healing happened. Significantly, the stretching out was a stretching out toward Jesus. It was giving the matter over to Christ.

Well now, if you have said about the man in the text "That's me!" as I suppose you have, I want you now to say about that man "That can be me! I can stretch out my trouble before Jesus! I can tell him what is withering in my life."

The strength that comes to the withered hand

Mark tells us that this man's hand was restored. There was an unwithering of what had shriveled. He was healed by Jesus.

Let's be careful here lest we breathe false hope. Whenever we study one of the miracle stories in the New Testament and make application to today we are wise to distinguish between healing and cure. Every cure is a healing. But not every healing is a cure. Sometimes there is no cure that transpires. Sometimes there is not an unwithering. But, even though there is no unwithering of the withered, there can be a strengthening.

⁵ Carnegie Samuel Calian, *The Gospel According to the Wall Street Journal* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), p. 110.

There are several examples of this that we can mention. Chief among them may be that of the Apostle Paul. He was never cured of that troubling thorn in his flesh. As a matter of fact he was told he would not be cured (2 Cor. 12:9). Still Paul was able to do amazing things in spite of that thorn. He himself reported, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

Closer to us historically is Franklin Roosevelt. FDR was never cured of the polio he contracted as a young man. His legs remained forever weak, even shriveled. Still, FDR was able to project amazing strength both during the Great Depression and WWII and all the while he was able to be a strong ally and encouragement to other polio sufferers.⁶

I can give a more personal answer and tell of a man I once knew. Some months ago I told you about my brother’s Little League coach. This is a story from when Paul was older and played baseball. His coach in his teen years was a man by the name of Bill Ackman. Part of Bill Ackman’s left arm was gone below the elbow. (If I ever knew what had happened to cause him to lose his hand and much of his arm, I do not remember now.) Not only was much of his arm gone, he had an artificial leg, too. It wasn’t one of the modern ones, by any means – it looked to be stiff, unbending, not a bit flexible. Still, Bill Ackman was able to tuck a baseball bat under his stump of an arm, toss the ball into the air, grab the bat as the ball came down, and hit it to the fielder he wanted it to reach in practice. He could hit grounders to each of the infielders. He could hit flies to each of the outfielders. And, what I thought hardest of all, he could hit pop-ups to be fielded by my brother, who was almost always the catcher. Bill Ackman, like the Apostle Paul and FDR, was never unwithered but he was made strong and able.

So I want you now to look at those examples I just gave and say of these people, “I want to be like one of them! I want to give my withering problem to Jesus who can help me to go on with strength.”

It comes to this. Whether you have a withered hand, a withered leg, a withered spirit, or a withering problem you can stretch it out to Jesus. I do not know if he will cure you. I cannot promise he will. But Christ will make you strong.

⁶ H. W. Brands, *Traitor to His Class* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. 12f, 156, 174ff, 777.