

“Hope”
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Text: Matthew 12:9-21

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
July 9, 2017

He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?’ so that they might accuse him.

He said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out?’

How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.’

Then he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other.

But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to make him known.

This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

*‘Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.*

*He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.*

*He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.*

And in his name the Gentiles will hope.’

What do you have in this world but your two hands. It’s how you get through life; how you make things, how you defend yourself; how you lift up your kids and then your grandchildren. But the man in the synagogue has the use of only one hand. He’s the man with the withered hand. He is the one, perhaps, who has given up hope of ever

being made whole again. But today he's the one who is in the sight of Jesus the miracle worker.

The Law

There's only one problem; it's the problem that keeps coming up in the Gospel narratives. It's the sabbath, and no work is permitted on the sabbath. Even healing is considered a form of work. It's the Law, as found in the sacred Scriptures, or, as we would say today, "Hey, it's in the Bible." It's the Law. You have got to learn the Law; you have got to teach the Law, you have got to practice the Law. Even though Jesus said he did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it, many viewed him as a law breaker. This is why we hear the Pharisees in this situation challenging Jesus before he does any thing, asking him,

"Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?"

Just know, they want nothing more than to stop Jesus; his ministry is upsetting the whole system and causing everyone to rethink their perceptions of religion and their settled ideas of God. They cannot be wrong. If they are wrong, it means that God is wrong. By stopping Jesus, they truly believe they are doing the right thing.

So, there's a tense disagreement going on about doctrine. The Law says this, but he's doing that. To cure someone is fine, but we were brought up to believe that's wrong to do it on the sabbath day. Today, I think we would say these are things that need working out, conversations and debates need to take place, commissions need to be formed and special conferences need to be held. It may get serious, maybe the church will split over it. Meanwhile there's a man in the corner with a withered hand losing hope by the minute.

"If you have a sheep," Jesus says, "just one sheep, and it falls into a pit on the sabbath, will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath."

The Grace of God

Then, it's the moment of the miracle; the thing that causes the crowd to be in awe. It's the something that happens and you know without a doubt that God is involved.

Jesus says to the man, "Stretch out your hand."

He's got nothing to lose. He may be in just as much trouble for breaking sabbath law, but this could be the cure. Punishment may await him, but standing in front of him is someone who sees and acknowledges his value as a human being. And even if there is only a glimmer of hope in that, it's enough.

He stretches out his hand to Jesus, and it's restored, as sound as the other.

There it is. That's the picture of God's grace. A gift freely given, but not for anything we do on our own behalf. That hand from Jesus that lifts us out of the pit. It's our rescue, our healing, our restoration to wholeness; this is the picture of our salvation.

Salvation through the Law could never happen. Try as we might to keep the Law so we can go to heaven when we die, as human beings we always fall short. Our inability to follow the Law is us trying to claw our way out of the pit, but we keep sliding

back down the walls. It is what Paul meant in his letter to the Romans from which Bill read earlier:

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

There is no hope in the Law; all hope is found in grace through faith in Jesus. This is why Jesus is a turning point in history. This is a new way. There is new thing, a new person in whom to place our hope. There is a new idea of justice. This is why *“...the Pharisees go out and conspire against him, and how to destroy him.”*

The grace of God, the salvation of souls through faith alone in Jesus Christ is altogether scandalous to anyone who is going to heaven on the presumption that it's achieved by their works and a strict adherence to the Law.

Prophecies Fulfilled—Hope Restored

But the good news is that hope is being restored by God through Jesus the Christ and is now available to all. The people of God have a long history with hope. Bill also read from the prophet Zechariah at the beginning of the service. Zechariah said,

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

I like that—*prisoners of hope*. A good name for the people of God.

But for those who waited hopefully for centuries for their Messiah, he comes in an unlikely way—this baby born in Bethlehem, this Jesus of Nazareth. In Matthew's gospel he quotes Isaiah to show how Jesus was foretold through *his* prophecy:

*“Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
And in his name the Gentiles will hope.”*

Hope is being restored through justice, and accessible to everyone in need. Even to the Gentiles, which includes you and me.

Hope

The man with the withered hand has seen his hand restored. There is hope in Jesus Christ. The leper has been healed. There is hope in Jesus Christ. The alcoholic has put down the drink once and for all. There is hope in Jesus Christ. The addict has been rescued and restored. There is hope in Jesus Christ. Relationships broken beyond repair have been reconciled. There is hope in Jesus Christ. The unforgivable acts in

your life have been forgiven, because there is hope in Jesus Christ. And when we die, we may be lowered into the ground. But just remember, the death we experience at the bottom of pits has been revoked and removed by the life-giving resurrection of Jesus Christ. The grave no longer holds us.

Jesus will not stop until this kind of justice is brought to victory. This is the source of our hope, and it's why we place that hope in him and in his name.

So, carefully consider in whom you are placing your hope. And then consider how you are sharing and spreading that hope. You will encounter at least one person this week who is desperate need of hope. Decide now to reach your hand to that person in the name of Jesus. Amen.