

Mark 2:23-3:6
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“Reach Out to Jesus”

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I came across a news story about a diver from the Cairns Aquarium in north Queensland who was feeding a shark and the shark bit the wrong end of the stick.

Divers at the aquarium hold out food to sharks using a stick. But general manager Julie Cullen said, instead of taking the end of the stick it had been trained to feed from, the shark bit the opposite end, sinking its teeth into the diver's hand.

The incident happened during a routine feeding time when the 32-year-old employee and his friend were in the tank. Ms. Cullen said the pair followed usual procedures, but the reef shark, one of the aquarium's newer arrivals from down south, had not settled in well to the feeding routine.

Fortunately, the injury wasn't particularly severe, but the diver was taken by ambulance to the hospital where he underwent surgery, mainly to clean his hand. Officials said he would likely take a couple of weeks off work, but there was no significant ongoing damage.

I'm glad the diver will be ok, but this story brought to mind that old phrase, “you should not bite the hand that feeds you.”

Today we meet Jesus shedding light upon the practice of sabbath. Sabbath is commonly referred to by people of faith as a “Day of Rest.” But, Sabbath had become so misunderstood by some leaders in Jesus day, they would punish people for the “work” of feeding the hungry, curing the ill, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisons. In fact, Jesus faces that threat in today's story; a man with a withered hand comes to him for healing, he says, “Come forward,” and as the man stretches out his hand it becomes healed. Instead of gratefulness for this healing miracle, we hear some Pharisees conspiring with some Herodians about how to destroy Jesus. Before we move on ... let this sink in a moment, these cultural and spiritual leaders were conspiring to destroy Jesus because he healed someone, and it happened to be the Sabbath.

It seems those leaders had come to believe Sabbath was an opportunity to shirk all responsibility for caring for others, set aside their spiritual gifts and calling. Jesus teaches us today that Sabbath is a regular reminder of our need to strengthen our responsibility to each other, exercise our spiritual gifts and calling and develop stronger connections to ourselves, to each other, and to God.

We could easily understand how the man with the withered hand was in need of physical healing, but these Pharisees and Herodians who observed this miraculous healing and turned away from Jesus instead of toward him, they were in need of Spiritual healing. To me the example of the man with the withered hand becomes exemplary to us. He knew he needed

Jesus' help, he put himself in the presence of Jesus, and when Jesus said, "come forward," "stretch out your hand." He trusted Jesus.

If we set aside Sabbath as a day to do nothing, or if we make it the day we cram in all our "spiritual stuff" aren't we misunderstanding how God intends the Sabbath to give shape to our life, forming us as people who live our faith and our gifts all week long?

Jesus had a gift and a calling to heal. Using his gift this way, on the sabbath, was a way of exercising God's purpose for his life. A way of saying there is NO day that we are not supposed to serve God and all living things. This is why he says humankind is not intended to serve the sabbath, the sabbath is intended to serve humankind.

On the other 6 days of the week we often allow other demands to distract us from practicing our gifts, and calling. Sabbath reminds us God's gifts and God's call to us are real; we have been created with gifts and graces which, when offered, become a tremendous benefit to others and increase the common good. Sabbath makes sure we practice making time for our spiritual vocation, in hopes that it will spill over into every day of the week. If we don't use sabbath as an opportunity to grow aren't we sort of biting the hand that feeds and restores us?

We all have something we can bring to Jesus for healing. For the man in our story it was his withered hand. For those Pharisees and Herodians they need to be healed of their unwillingness to learn from Jesus. For us, we may bring to Jesus a wearied heart, a waned sense of compassion. We might bring to Jesus a weakened sense of courage, or a woeful response to loving our enemy. You and Jesus know what it is you need to bring for his healing touch.

And the world has things to bring before Jesus for healing. Look how we try to replace community with consumerism, we try to replace spirituality with sentimentality, we try to replace peace with winning a war, we try to replace truth with opinions and this spiritual drought hurts us and, as much good and trusted science is suggesting -- it hurts the whole of creation too.

This morning we can take a lesson from this man with the withered hand. When we identify that which needs healing in us, we can enter the presence of Jesus, bring forward our own brokenness and seek the wholeness only God can offer.

give

This morning as we share in the sacrament of communion, we have another opportunity to come forward, reaching out to Christ Jesus for healing.

What do you want to bring on behalf of yourself, your family, your neighborhood, or the world, what withered thing within you can Jesus work a miracle of God's healing in, and call you to live a Sabbath life every day, exercising the Spirit and joy and hope Christ is constantly offering us.

Jesus calls us forward, then he sends us out! May we find strength for the journey in this time of worship.

Amen