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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, November 29, 2023
Matthew 12:1-14
The Man with the Withered Hand

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 12:1-14, RSV
Last week we read some of the most beautiful words in the Bible: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Now we read about Jesus healing a man with a withered hand. He does so on the Sabbath.

¹²At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ²But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath." ³He said to them, "Have you not read what David did, when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵Or have you not read in the law how on the sabbath the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are guiltless? ⁶I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸For the Son of man is lord of the sabbath."

⁹And he went on from there, and entered their synagogue. ¹⁰And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. ¹¹He said to them, "What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹²Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath." ¹³Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, whole like the other. ¹⁴But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to talk about the man with the withered hand, but before I do that, let me say a few words about Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath.

He gives us our rule: "It is lawful to do good on the sabbath." That is why Jesus goes ahead and heals the man with the withered hand. Jesus was doing good to a man in need. He would have us do the same, even on the Sabbath.

And yet I think it is important to try to reckon with the great Biblical background for this rule about doing good on the Sabbath. That great

background is the Third Commandment. As Martin Luther counts the commandments, the Third Commandment goes this way:

You are to hallow the day of rest. (Luther, *Small Catechism*, Kolb-Wengert Edition)

We are to keep the day of rest holy. That translation is from the modern Kolb-Wengert Edition of the *Book of Concord*. The old Tappert Edition phrases the Third Commandment this way:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

This is also a lovely translation, but in this case I prefer the modern translation about keeping holy the day of rest. The day of rest. If you read the full commandment in the Bible, you will find that rest is a key matter in this commandment. And so Deuteronomy Chapter 5 says this:

¹²Observe the sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; ¹⁴but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your manservant, or your maidservant, or your ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. (Deuteronomy 5:12-14, RSV)

Why, even the LORD rested on the seventh day from all his labors. He knows our frame. He knows that we need some rest. So, he commands us to rest lest we work ourselves to the bone. Let it be your principle in life that when you get up and head off to work on Monday morning, you will be rested and ready for that work.

Still, Jesus gives us an exception. We are to do good, even on the Sabbath day. So, Jesus healed the man with the withered hand, even on the Sabbath.

Now, let's take a look at the man with the withered hand. My heart tugs toward this story because my grandmother on my mother's side had a withered hand. Indeed, the lower half of her arm was withered, along with her hand. I never heard her complain about it, and it was a disability that did not seem to hold her back much. She could pin the wash against her side with her withered hand and hang up the clothes on the clothesline with her good hand. She could pin the chunk of wood against her side with her withered hand and grab that chunk of wood with her good hand and drop it into her wood burning stove. So, she never complained about her withered hand and

she went on about her business, and yet, I think that one of the joys of heaven for her is to have her withered hand fixed! That is going to be a joy for her.

Well, in this evening's story, the man with the withered hand did not have to wait for heaven because he had met the Lord of heaven, even Jesus Christ our Savior.

This healing took place in the synagogue. There sits the man. Perhaps he is one of the neighbors of the people in the synagogue. In any case, it is evident that he is a suffering man, with his withered hand. But do the Pharisees hope for the healing? Do they hope that Jesus can rescue this man? No, their object is different. They are not moved by compassion for the suffering man. Rather, they hope to catch Jesus. They hope for the healing so that they might destroy Jesus. Our text says that they get what they want. And so we read these words of the healing followed by these grim words:

¹³Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, whole like the other. ¹⁴But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him. (Matthew 12:13-14, RSV)

The sight of the disabled man does not subdue them. They do not seek that the man should be made whole, but that they might have an excuse to destroy Jesus. They are bound and determined against Jesus, and it leaves their hearts hard.

Somewhere along the line, Jesus comes to know of the plan to destroy him. We are reading Matthew 12 now. By the time we get to Matthew 16, things are already clear to Jesus. And so read of his knowledge of his passion:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21, RSV)

Perhaps Jesus knew even then, even as he was healing the man with the withered hand, that he was entering into deep troubles. But no matter. Jesus heals the man, and immediately his hand "was restored, whole like the other." Now, he can lift up his children with either hand. Now, he can work in his shop or on his boat with more efficiency. Now, he can take the hand of his wife in his own restored hand. It was a good and brave thing Jesus did that day.

This is the Jesus to whom we belong. Through Baptism, we have given ourselves to him and he, to us. He is the same "yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), and so this story of the man with the withered hand shines

with radiance and hope for us, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.