

Luke 6:6-11, 17-19 ⁶ On another Sabbath, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷ The scribes and the Pharisees were watching him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find grounds to bring an accusation against him. ⁸ But he knew what they were thinking, and he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand in the middle." He got up and stood there. ⁹ Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" ¹⁰ After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." The man did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹ But the scribes and the Pharisees were filled with fury and began discussing with one another what they might do to Jesus... ¹⁷ Then Jesus came down with the twelve and stood on a level place, along with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Luke 6:6-11, 17-19

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"The Courage to be Healed"

Rev. Amy Terhune

I want to open this morning with some wise words from Rev. Dr. Leonard Sweet, who appropriately notes that, "we are all fundamentalists about something."

Says Sweet, "Most of us are fundamentalists about fundamentalism. We think we are either fundamentally against it or fundamentally for it. But "fundamentalists" can be found in all walks of life.

"The jogger going out at 5:30 a.m. on a dark, blustery, blizzardy morning is a fundamentalist about her exercise regime.

"The 6-year-old who makes his parents pick off every single one of those tiny, dehydrated onion squares from his Happy Meal burger is a fundamentalist about his food.

"The office manager whose weekly staff meetings always take exactly the same form, no matter what crisis is surging through the office, or who insists that everything that takes place be "according to Robert's Rules of Order" is a procedural fundamentalist.

"And there are countless other kinds of "fundamentalists" as well. Monday Night Football fundamentalists, the toilet-paper-rolls-under vs. the toilet-paper-rolls-over-fundamentalists, No-nuts-in-fudge fundamentalists, Christmas presents opened on Christmas Eve fundamentalists, no white shoes after Labor Day fundamentalists.

"Even within the defined domain of "religious fundamentalism" there are many varieties. If you think your church is flexible and receptive to new ideas, just try suddenly changing the prescribed Sunday morning order of worship. Or read from a different translation of scripture, or better yet, mess with the hymnal. The point is that all of us are fundamentalists about something..." [7 ¶]s adapted from "Everyone's a Fundamentalist About Something" by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.]

Just a couple of weeks ago, I read an article by a fellow clergyman who has taken to opening worship services with the sacrament of communion – that's how they *start* – which goes against everything I've ever been taught about proper liturgy in the church. I mean, nobody does it that way – not the Catholics or the Episcopalians or the Lutherans or the Presbyterians or the Baptists or Mennonites or the Quakers or the Methodists. I've got a book of Worship that lays out across 750

pages every possible worship scenario I could ever face in my lifetime. It's got an order for dedicating the eternal light that hangs from the ceiling, for crying out loud! But in 750 pages, it never once starts with Communion. EVER! I don't know what my District Superintendent or my Bishop would say about that, but I mentioned it to another colleague, and he nearly went into apoplectic shock. Open with communion? You can't do that! That's terrible theology. Which I know. I've grilled people on the theology of communion through the Board of Ordained Ministry for 12 years. So what happens if you start with the body and blood of Jesus, the open table, the invitation to commune with God? Does it change the feel, the tenor of rest of the service? I don't know. Because I've never in my life experienced it done that way. Color me intrigued.

Which may leave some of you scratching your heads at this point, wondering where I'm going with this? Am I trying to prepare you for a big change? No, I have no immediate plans to move communion to the beginning of the service.

In our scripture this morning, we have an argument taking place between Jesus and the religious leaders, and contrary to how so many scholars paint this scene, I cannot write the argument off as stupid or unjustified. But a bit of background is in order. It's the Sabbath Day. According to scripture, God rests on the 7th day and commands us to do likewise – to honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy. In today's world, we've sometimes reduced the Sabbath to a "me" day when we relax and don't bother with dishes or housework or anything else. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing, by any stretch. But we should make clear that Sabbath was never meant to be a "me" day – it was supposed to be a "WE" day when we take time out from the business of our work to remember and reconnect with the source of all things; to nurture our relationship with God. The ancient Jews of Jesus' day had carefully codified everything that was not allowed on the Sabbath – there were 27 different categories of things you could NOT do on the sabbath. They changed their routines and kept a strict protocol in order to remember the Holiness of God. Sabbath was about resting and remembering.

Jesus comes to worship, and he's asked to teach. Are they, like the hometown crowd we saw in Nazareth a few weeks back, hoping for a show? Are they genuinely curious? Depending on who you reference, all of these are true. I can tell you this much. The issue with the scribes and Pharisees here isn't that they wanted to honor the sabbath. That's a good thing. The issue is that that they came to worship that morning looking to find an accusation against Jesus. They went looking for trouble. They hoped Jesus would entrap himself.

In the German language, there's a word that's made a leap to English because it's so on the nose. The word is schadenfreude. 'Schade' meaning harm or damage and 'Freude' meaning joy. Schadenfreude is the joy that comes from seeing harm or damage come to another. Several years back, I was on I-75 heading home going about 75 or 80 mph when this big old black pick-up truck passed me like I was puttering along going 25 on the highway. I mean, they just blew right past me, weaving in and out of traffic. I muttered a few choice words and maintained my course. A couple of miles up the road, I saw that black pick-up on the side of the road, with blue lights circling behind it. I smiled smugly to myself. "Ha! Justice!" The feeling I experienced in that moment was Schadenfreude. Joy at the misfortune of another. That's what the Pharisees are looking for. They want Jesus to dig himself into a hole.

We can only assume that they knew that the man with the withered hand would be there. No doubt, he's there every week. Luke makes a point of noting that it's the man's right hand that's withered. Mark doesn't tell us that in his record of the story, but Luke does. Why? Because the Jews believed that your right hand was your dominant hand. It's the one you should use to work, eat, gesture, or greet others. Your left hand was what one used for chores of personal or bodily hygiene in a desert climate in the days before toilet paper. There's a reason that God puts the good guys on his right

hand and the bad guys on his left hand. There's reason that the sheep are at God's right hand and the goats at the left. To all of you who are left-handed, my deepest apologies. Don't take it personally. But back then, left-handed people forced themselves to be right-handed early on. If one's right hand is withered, shriveled, disfigured to a point where you can't use it, it's not just an issue of not being able to work. It's a source of shame and disgrace. Nobody seems to be concerned with him. He's just a prop, a tool, something to trip Jesus up. The fact that he can't function normally in society isn't their concern. Honoring the Sabbath is what's at stake for them. Everyone is a fundamentalist somehow.

The problem in our text is legalism. "Do you know how the ice cream treat known as a sundae got its name? The year was 1875, and the ice cream soda was about a year old and fast gaining in popularity. However, in Evanston, Illinois, the elders of the Methodist church were taking a very dim view of this ice cream treat. Some of these church leaders believed that "soda water," or carbonated water, was a "mite intoxicating." Community leaders were pressured into making a law that forbade the selling and serving of ice cream sodas on Sundays, on the premise that they were a corrupting influence on all. Needless to say, the town was shocked at the ban on ice cream sodas. And in W. C. Garwood's Drug Store, it was worse than shocking. It hurt sales at the soda fountain, which was the favorite gathering place of youngsters, families and Sunday-strolling sweethearts. So, to get around the local law, an enterprising fountain clerk started to serve scoops of ice cream dribbled over with thick syrup: a soda minus the soda water. The soda-less sodas became called "Sunday sodas," and they were quite legal in every way. However, they became so popular that customers began asking for "Sundays" all through the week. The church elders were indignant at having been outwitted. To have the last word, they raised objections to the fact that the dish was named after the Sabbath. Again ingenuity stepped in, and the spelling was altered to s-u-n-d-a-e. [adapted from Robert Wayne Pelton. *Laughable Laws And Courtroom Capers*. (New York: Walker and Company, 1993), p. 109; as used in "Battle With The Law" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

If everyone is a fundamentalist somehow, that including Jesus. But Jesus' fundamental is love. As is typical, he sees the man, the suffering, the shame, the sorrow. He sees the person. That's Jesus' fundamental. He's there to teach, and not just with words but by example. Jesus has a knack for seizing teachable moments. And his lesson is not that the Sabbath Day doesn't matter. Quite the contrary. It's that we love God by loving our neighbor. To love God, to honor the holiness of God, Jesus helps one in need. He heals one who is suffering.

And Jesus does it with spectacular flare. The lesson tells us that Jesus knows what they're thinking, but he doesn't brush the guy aside, saying "I'll heal you tomorrow, or I'll heal you later when there's less of a crowd and it won't make a scene." No, he calls the guy up front and center, and he throws down the gauntlet, so to speak, completely reframing the issue: is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it? Let me put his question another way. What Jesus really wants to know is: Is it lawful to do harm on the sabbath? If one has the power to do good, to restore life, and does not use it because it's the sabbath, is that honoring the holiness of God? Jesus' question is not about what's permitted, but about what's required. He clearly intends that the crowd understand that doing good on the Sabbath is not a violation of the 4th commandment to honor the Sabbath. His question is especially sharp given that the motives behind the behavior of the scribes and Pharisees are to accuse and malign. He redefines holiness as what we do rather than what we avoid, which is quite a paradigm shift.

But let me go back to that man with the withered hand for a moment. I don't know what life was like for him on a day-to-day basis. I don't know if he had family to help him, or if he was on his own. I don't know if he could work, support himself or others. I don't know if he was born that way, or if some kind of injury or illness had left him permanently disabled. The scripture isn't concerned with

his details. Nor does it give us any insight into the experience from his point of view. But I can't help wondering about him. I titled the sermon this morning "The Courage to be Healed". I admit that I was thinking of him when I set that title. I was imagining what it must feel like to be called up in front of everyone he'd ever known. Was he scared? Humiliated? Anxious? Or was it freeing to have Jesus finally acknowledge publicly what everyone must surely have whispered about behind his back? I don't know, but it's no small thing to let oneself be Jesus' object lesson for the morning. Yet, when Jesus called him forward, he came. He placed himself in God's hands. He let God work.

I like how James W. Moore wraps this up. He writes, "Some years ago when I was serving another church in another state, one Sunday morning during Sunday School, a ninth grader pulled the fire alarm. Bells began ringing loudly all over the building, and in just a few moments, three fire trucks with sirens blaring were there to answer the false alarm. When we asked the ninth grader why he pulled the fire alarm, he said, "I didn't think it would actually work!"

Isn't that what we say to God? On page after page of the scriptures, God urges us to put love first, to have good will toward all people, to pray for others, to help others, to care for others, to serve others. It asks us to put ourselves in God's loving hands and let God work. Supremely in Jesus, God shows us that love is the answer, love is the way, love is what He wants... but we don't think it will work. We rely on power plays, hostile threats, political strategies, and bureaucratic systems. [2 ¶s adapted from "The Healing of the Man with the Withered Hand" by James W. Moore, www.Sermons.com.] Earlier this week, an American leader spoke to NATO about investing in defense, saying, "We can talk all we want about values. Values are important. But you can't shoot values. You can't shoot flags and you can't shoot strong speeches. There is no replacement for hard power. As much as we may not want to like the world we live in, in some cases, there's nothing like hard power."

That's practical wisdom in our world. That's pragmatism on the world stage. Because really, we don't think love will work. Love is for personal relationships not nation-building. Love is for mission projects not systemic shifts. So maybe the sermon title is for me; for you. Do we have the courage to let Jesus call us up front and center, out in front of everyone, to be his object lesson for healing a withered world? Hostility or hope? Hate or healing? Fear or faith? Legalism or love? The greatest example of hard power I ever saw in this world was when a man spread his arms wide on a cross and died to save this world. It worked then and it still works. Thanks be to God. Amen.