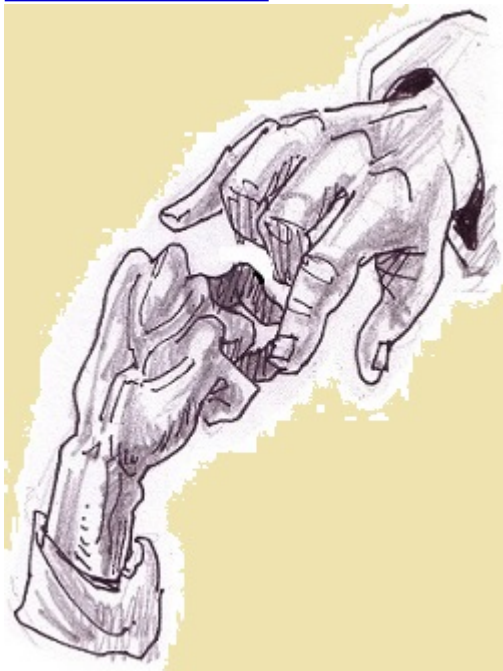


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“Stretch out your hand” (Mark 3:1).

*1 Sam 17:32-33, 37, 40-51; Mark 3:1-6).*

In today’s Gospel, Jesus’ critics try to trap him by forcing him to choose between compassion and obeying the law. A disabled man is placed before him in the synagogue to see if he will heal his withered hand. Seeing their evil intentions, Jesus puts the questions to them: “Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath or evil.” They are clearly trying to do evil by using the man to score theological points. In their narrow view of things, Jesus cannot be from God if he breaks the law.

Jesus’ response is to transcend the false choice by showing that to do good on the sabbath fulfills the law, which is to honor God by keeping the sabbath. What greater way is there to honor God than by alleviating suffering. The law of love is greater than the interpretation of the sabbath law that rejected any kind of “work.” Jesus tells the man to stretch out his withered hand, and the hand is restored. The miracle exposes the withered hearts of the Pharisees, who are trapped in their own staged dilemmas. In their frustration at not being able to trap Jesus, his enemies begin to plot his death, the ultimate evil.

How is it that religious intent is so easily drawn into either/or choices that divide the world into right and wrong, good and bad, moral and immoral? Absolutist positions, like legalistic ones, end up trapping good people into positions that preclude dialogue or compromise. Jesus refused to be trapped in this way, nor did he resolve

every moral question, except to say that love is the most important law. If we strive to love, love will find a way.

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