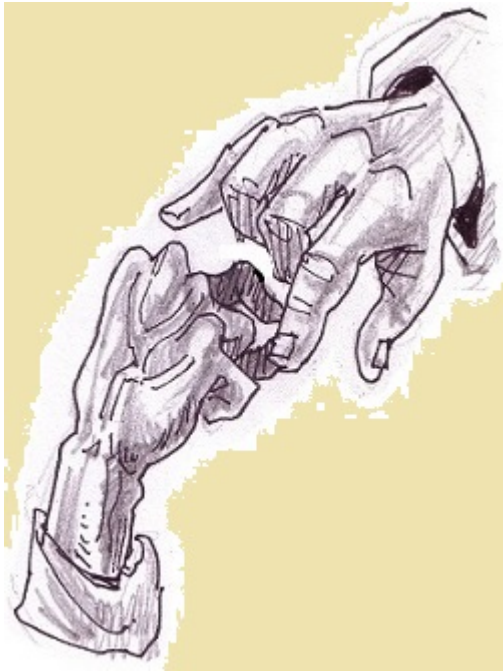


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“Stretch out your hand” (Mark 5:5).

*Heb 1:1-3, 15-17; Mark 3:1-6*

Last week, we read in Mark’s account of the healing of a leper that Jesus “stretched out his hand” to touch him. In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells the man with the withered hand, “Stretch out your hand.” Because of Mark’s economy of words, this detail becomes important as deliberate. I suggest that Mark was describing Jesus’ healings as requiring both courage and a kind of daring reach and flexibility beyond the tight, narrow legalism of his critics.

The setting of the miracle is another test of whether Jesus will break the sabbath law. The Pharisees are using the crippled man to trap Jesus, “so that they might accuse him.” In John’s Gospel, they will use a woman taken in adultery in the same way, with no regard for her life. Will Jesus “stretch” the law as he did by touching the leper and as he was doing publicly by eating with sinners? At stake in these controversies is whether compassion surpasses rules and love fulfills the heart of the law.

Jesus’ compassion is contrasted to the mean-spirited intent of his enemies to find sufficient fault to reject Jesus’ entire message and ultimately destroy him. He challenges them: “Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?” They remain silent. We witness a rare show of indignation from Jesus as he looks at these so-called models of piety, their hard hearts and

narrow minds plotting his death. It is they who have withered their souls and hardened their hearts to the grace of the moment. To shame them, Jesus tells the man to stretch out his withered hand, and it is immediately restored.

The same theme is implicit in Jesus' parable of the wineskins. Only fresh skins can hold the new wine as it expands. Love stretches our capacity to engage new challenges. If we are inflexible, hard of heart or rigid of mind, we will never know the adventure of exploring the margins of our small worlds, learning new things, meeting new people, experiencing diversity, befriending a stranger or loving an enemy.

Today, January 20, 2021, this nation will inaugurate new leaders, who will raise their right hands to take their respective oaths of office. These past months, whatever our political persuasion, we have all been stretched by the challenge to grow, learn and move forward. Previous inaugurations have been graced by poets like Robert Frost and Maya Angelou and the many musicians who have performed. Paul Simon stands out in my memory for "American Tune," a solemn counterpoint anthem that celebrates hope but also acknowledges the reality of a nation exhausted and often disillusioned by its broken history and failure to fulfill its high ideals.

*We come in the age's most uncertain hours*

*And sing an American tune*

It seems relevant to this moment and worth sharing. Here is a moving rendition by young voices, Josh Turner and Leah Taub. The full original by Simon follows on the Youtube site.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQOJcVfrAZk>