Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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September 5, 2021
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"The scribes and the Pharisees watched him closely to see if he would cure on the Sabbath” (Luke 6:7).

Col 1:24—2:3’ Luke 6:6-11

Luke’s story of the healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath recalls another withered hand in Psalm 137: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither" (vs. 5). The scene is conveyed poignantly by Don McClean in his 1971 song “By the Waters of Babylon.” A Judean musician is asked by his Babylonian captors to sing one his homeland’s songs. He mourns and vows that his right hand should wither and his tongue cleave to the roof of his mouth if he forgets Jerusalem and accepts a comfortable life in exile.

The Jews returned from exile in the fifth century B.C.E., determined to rebuild Jerusalem and to be faithful to the Torah. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jews recommitted to strict obedience to the Law. But by the time of Jesus, this obedience had become the total focus of the scribes and Pharisees, who objected to Jesus healing on the Sabbath. The story of the man with the withered hand is a way for Luke to make the point that for Jesus, legal observance is not enough. If we forget the original purpose of the law — to love -- we wither. Jesus enrages his legalistic critics by healing the man, saying, “Stretch out your hand.” This is what Jesus himself has been doing –- stretching the law, reaching beyond its literalness to touch lepers, to reclaim outcasts and sinners.

This story parallels another instance in Luke 13:10 when Jesus heals a woman on the Sabbath who was bent over double. Legal observance alone does not produce uprightness, and when practiced without love, causes the heart to wither. Without

compassion, the scribes and Pharisees were “placing heavy burdens on people without lifting a finger to help them” (see Matt 23).

If we forget love, our hands and hearts will wither and, no matter how much we pray, our tongues will cease to praise God. We will find ourselves weeping and alone in exile by the waters of a distant land far from home.

Labor Day 2021

Today's Gospel falls on Labor Day, when as a nation we pause to say thank you to all those who perform the many labors that sustain our economy and society. We pray for the hands that do physical labor, for those in healthcare, public safety, food service and teaching, true labors of love that sustain others. We pray that workers may join hands in collective bargaining for fair wages, safe workplaces, respect and dignity.

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