

Another Synagogue Healing

Mark 3:1-12 by Patty Friesen (Feb. 25/18)

Jesus returns to the synagogue in Capernaum for another showdown on the sabbath, just to repeat his offences from last week by healing the man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue on the sabbath. It highlights Jesus' parallel conflicts with sickness and the religious order. This is a turning point in Jesus' public ministry. He could have healed the man with the withered hand in private but chooses to force the issue, knowing the religious leaders were watching him. It is a defiant act of civil disobedience. Under the glare of the media lights as it were, Jesus challenges them, "is it lawful to do good on the sabbath, to save life or kill it?"

It may not seem like this is a life or death situation but some commentators believe the man was a stone mason, a stone carpenter like Jesus would have been himself, for the industry of Capernaum was to quarry and build the stone palaces and cities of King Herod in the north. So this withered hand could have been a life and death situation for this man and his family. Even the rabbis writing on sabbath laws said that there are a distinction between sabbaths - there are sabbaths on which you must rest and there are sabbaths on which you should not rest. Rabbi Simon Menasiah said, "the sabbath is to serve you - not you serve the sabbath. This implies that we should disregard one sabbath for the sake of saving the life of a person so that person and their family may be able to observe many sabbaths in the future.

It is interesting that the injury is a hand when Mark is very careful to describe in chapter 1 that Jesus stretched out his own hand to touch the unclean sickness of Peter's mother-in-law and the leper and others will stretch out their hands to touch him for healing. Jesus isn't made unclean by touching unclean people. The reverse is true - that his power in turn cleanses them. He challenges the religious laws of labelling people as unclean and separate from the rest of the community. It upsets the social dynamics of how people relate to each other as the sick and the healthy. Jesus' work is much more than physical healing. It restores members to each other in religious communities so they can worship together. It restores families to each other and

restores people to their neighbourhoods and towns. It is a multi-layered, all-encompassing healing. Jesus challenges who is really sick and who is really in need of healing and he does so on the religious turf of the Pharisees. Jesus takes control of religious space and the religious holy day and religious teaching and casts out the old order with authority - a housecleaning of the highest order and they will have none of it.

The religious leaders don't take Jesus' bait and are silent to his challenge. Jesus looks at them with anger and grief at their hardness of heart. In Aramaic, Jesus' anger often is expressed with a snort - a fast breath of rage. "Stretch out your hand," he commands and the man did so and his hand was restored. Immediately the religious Pharisees went out and conspired with the political Herodians to destroy him - an unlikely match bound by their hate. Jesus used the sabbath to save a life, but the Pharisees and Herodians use it to kill.

Knowing this threat, Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea. He is getting out of town, withdrawing to the people who receive him in faith and a great multitude from Galilee following him, hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, beyond Jordan and the region around - from east, west, north, south. Unfortunately this great crowd includes his critics as well. Jesus told his disciples to get him a boat or the crowds would have crushed him, for all who had diseases were pressing upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down and shouted, "You are the Son of God!" A declaration we will hear again by the centurion at the cross. It is the unlikely people who seem to know who Jesus is, while the disciples, religious leaders and Romans are blind and deaf to it.

Once, when an eighth grade Sunday School class was discussing the crucifixion, they were asked if they identified with the disciples, the religious leaders or the Romans. One student responded: "None of them, they were all jerks. They were all looking out for their own interests."

This notion that they were all jerks and that we have the potential to be jerks ourselves is an important interpretation of today's scripture. Modern day commentators warn against the

Christian tendency to blame the Jewish religious leaders alone for the death of Christ, a historic interpretation that led to pogroms of Jews throughout Europe and Russia. It seems like we are way beyond that kind of interpretation but inclusive interpretation always takes vigilance.

As religious Mennonites, we have much in common with our Jewish brothers and sisters. We value the Old Testament scriptures and for better or worse, we understand the idea of a chosen people because we think we too were chosen. As ethnic Mennonites, both minorities were exiled in Russia where we lived in isolated communities side by side. Many Mennonite villages in Russia had Jewish synagogues - the Russian Czars thought it best to throw all the religious minorities together in Ukraine. As Mennonites and as Jews, we had our distinctive dress and distinctive language - Low German is much like Yiddish - a language from the Dutch Lowlands. There are a few examples of inter-marriage. There were pogroms against Jewish people in the 1800's in Odessa in which a P.M. Friesen and B.H. Unruh spoke publicly in defence of their Jewish neighbours.

Each of our communities enjoyed economic success in Russia which drew attention and persecution from revolutionaries one hundred years ago which led to mass emigration to Canada and the US from both communities. While waiting for the ship to Canada in Southampton, England, my grandfather, Jakob Friesen visited with a Jewish man emigrating from Germany. Seeing the shabbiness of grandfather's coat, this Jewish man said, "You will freeze in Canada in that thing. Take my extra coat." 90 years later, my brother and sister-in-law were in Bierobjahn, an exiled Jewish community in eastern Russia to adopt their daughter Kathryn and were saved in the process by a Russian Jewish lawyer. Jewish people have intervened for the Friesen family at crucial moments in our history. I can only hope we'd do the same.

The turning point in our joint Mennonite/Jewish communities in Ukraine was the Second World War, of course. Mennonites saw the Nazis as their German liberators from the oppressive Russians and while remaining silent of Nazi murder of Jews. Frank Epp writing of

this era says, "The lack of intervention on behalf of Jews was the great sin of omission by Mennonites during the Second World War." P. 26. "The Mennonites' affinity for the Germans, combined with not uncommon anti-Semitic feelings, resulted in no overt opposition to what was happening to the Jews. p. 35. There were isolated incidents of Mennonites interceding on behalf of Jewish individuals as best they could. For instance, Mary Fast, while in hospital with malaria, was saved from deportation by the Soviets when a Jewish doctor hid her records. In turn when the Germans were rounding up Jews, she tried to speak in his behalf." It's a sad history that we must humbly confess. We were jerks protecting our own interests. It is a withered hand of complicity we need to stretch out in need of healing.

Hopefully we are more courageous these days and vigilant in our inter-faith work with Jews, Muslims and Indigenous people. Synagogues and mosques are working jointly to sponsor Syrian refugees. Saskatoon's Rabbi Jodorkovsky and former Bishop Donald Bolen have held brilliant conversations on the religious music of Leonard Cohen. We need to create opportunities for collaboration and protection and do so in creative non-violent ways. Germany itself leads the way. The village of Wunsiedel is menaced each year by a neo-Nazi march. The villagers have put up signs informing the marchers that for every metre they walked, 10 Euros would be donated to Exit Germany, which offers support to people who are quitting the neo-Nazi scene. Colourful banners were hung along the march route with messages such as, "Thank you for your donations, lovely Nazis!" Free bananas were handed out to encourage the neo-Nazis to keep up their marching strength so more money could be donated. The campaign was so effective, it spread to other cities. (B3, Globe and Mail, July 3, 2015). Talk about stretching forth a withered hand for healing!

Let us pray: Healing God, you take our sin, our prejudice and complicity and desire to heal us. Help us stretch out our hands in confession and humility that we may experience your touch in your holy place. Amen.