

Luke 6:1-16
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Whole Life Challenge

A few Decembers ago, a friend invited me to join her in the Whole Life Challenge. I thought it might be fun to try something new reconnecting with a friend who lived a few hours away, so I told her “Yes,” and went on to enjoy every last Christmas cookie and holiday treat, not giving it another thought. Then January arrived, as did another round of the challenge. It served as a good reset and an excuse to check in regularly with this friend and others. The main difference with the challenge from other New Year-transform-your-life programs was that it was true to its name. It invited me to look at my life as a *whole*, not just eating. In the challenge I was invited to set a sleep goal, to work on practices like setting goals and putting down my phone, and to committing to exercise and mobility work, or stretching. As my frequent moaning and groaning reflects, after sitting too much for too long, human bodies grow rigid and stressed. Stretching helps.

In our passage for this morning, Jesus finds himself at odds with the Pharisees over Sabbath law and practice. Too often in the Christian tradition, the Pharisees have been derided and discounted as strict legalists who disregard the good of the people for the sake of following a heartless law code. It’s more complicated than that. Pharisees are legal scholars and religious leaders who are entrusted with a difficult challenge. It is their sacred duty to help the Jewish community maintain their identity and religious practice amid a hostile world. Jews in Jesus’ day are in the minority and must walk a very fine line between keeping the peace with the empire and staying faithful to the one true God. Writing nearly seventy years after Jesus lived,

the author of Luke's gospel is charged with recording the Jesus story in a time of continuing turmoil. The Second Temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed by the Romans. Persecution is an everyday occurrence, not simply a looming threat. The Pharisees in the gospels are not wrong to be afraid. Religious freedoms are genuinely at stake in Jesus' time. The Pharisees carry a vivid communal memory of their ancestors' time in exile; they do not have to draw on their imagination to know what this tightwire looks and feels like. They have good cause to want to maintain a certain status quo and fly under the empire's radar. However, it seems that their fear has gotten the best of them.

Jesus does not stumble into a confrontation with the Pharisees. In fact, it could be said that he picks a fight with them in Luke's account. This is not a sweet, innocuous, or naïve Jesus who is oblivious to the trouble he is stirring up. This is a Jesus who is heaven-bent on confronting the religious establishment on its practice and its very identity. For these initial confrontations, Luke gives us a stage play of sorts. As our passage begins, the curtains part, and the spotlight falls first on the disciples and Jesus in a wheat field stage right. Jesus and the Pharisees have their first debate and then the lights dim. The next scene places Jesus in the middle of a synagogue, center stage as it were. Two spotlights shine down now—one on him and one on the man with the withered hand. Jesus' gaze is focused on the man, drawing ours to him, too. Then a third light shines down on the Pharisees and scribes stage left. Instead of directing their attention to the man, their eyes are on Jesus, "to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find grounds to bring an accusation against him."¹ They are not paying attention to the most important issue in the room. They are ignoring the one in their

¹ Luke 6:7, NRSVue

midst who is hurting and are instead fixated on Jesus, determined to catch him breaking their understanding of the rules.

Luke tells us that Jesus knows what they are thinking. It's less about his being a mind-reader and more about his knowing people and reading the room. He has been raised in synagogues. He is a faithful Jew. He has been nurtured by the practices, the laws, and the leaders. He knows the scriptures and the tradition that this community, *his* community has inherited and embraced. He also knows how far the community has strayed from God's intention for the people of God. Fear has a way of doing that. Jesus knows *this*, too.

Jesus then calls the man to stand in the middle of all of them and asks all those gathered there a question: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?"² His is not a question about one statute or another; it's bigger than that. If pressed the Pharisees would acknowledge that healing is not utterly forbidden on the Sabbath. So Jesus is pushing them on the fuller understanding of Sabbath itself. As you may recall, Sabbath practice arises from two different but related moments in the relationship between God and the people of God. Sabbath is mentioned in the first of the two creation narratives in Genesis. After six days of creating life out of formless and void chaos, God rests. The tradition goes on to teach that if the Creator of the universe intentionally rests, it is good and right and expected that God's creations do the same. Secondly, the tradition holds that there was no rest and no time for worship while our ancestors were slaves in Egypt. As freed people, we rest as a way of acknowledging that God alone is our ultimate ruler and that life, rest, and restoration are crucial components of the covenant community, that we are not defined solely by what we

² Luke 6:9, NRSVue

produce. The Ten Commandments also emphasize that slaves and foreigners and animals are a part of this covenant community and that they too need rest too.³ More than a rigid rule to be followed, Sabbath-keeping shapes a people and a community amidst an empire-driven world. It is not about checking off boxes or looking for gotcha moments. It is not about tripping each other up. Sabbath practice is about being a life-giving, life-restoring community in every way. It always has been. It seems that the Pharisees have forgotten this.

Then Jesus tells the man to stretch out his hand. The detail about its being his right hand is a crucial one. In ancient times:

The right hand was used for work, gesturing and greeting, and the left hand was used for bodily hygiene. To not be able to present the 'clean' hand in greeting was shameful, and a social and perhaps vocational obstacle.⁴

Restoring this man's right hand was more than placing a splint on his arm; restoring this man's right hand was a way to restore him to the community. This was more than a random act of kindness on Jesus' part; this was an act of restoration and redemption, of drawing this outsider in and giving him new life. Healing and wholeness for God's children is always a good and holy thing. There is no reason to wait.

While the instruction, "Stretch out your hand" was directed at the man, I suspect that Jesus was pushing the Pharisees to stretch as well, to stretch rigid muscles that had grown tight with fear, to stretch rigid hearts that had grown tight with caution. I have never been what anyone would call limber. Through years of dancing, I would bend and stretch and attempt to

³ See Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5

⁴ As noted by Elizabeth Cole Goodrich in her paper for The Well, 2016.

lift my leg a little higher. I still remember the summer afternoon during high school in a dance class when I could finally do the splits. I was elated, but it didn't last. Without constant and persistent stretching, the muscles grew tight again. I would most definitely injure myself if I attempted the splits right now.

The same can be said for human nature. Jesus is not asking the Pharisees to grow a new muscle. He is pushing them and the community they lead to stretch muscles they already have, not just for one man's benefit but for everyone's. Yes, God has given laws and limits. It is not a case of being loosey goosey or throwing law and tradition out the window. As the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus is calling the Pharisees to remember, to embrace, and to embody Sabbath and what it means to be a Sabbath community, to remember who they are and whose they are. Fishermen are not the only ones called to offer life to others in God's name. One would hope that religious leaders and the communities they lead would be about offering that life, too. Rather than celebrating or even acknowledging the man's healing and restoration, these leaders remain stubbornly bent on Jesus' destruction. They exit stage left, withered by their fury, their fear, and their desire for revenge.

The religious community is still being challenged to stretch even now. Fear is rampant and powerful and contagious. Fear could easily cause those of us on the inside to grow rigid, to lose our focus, to fail to look where Jesus looks, to forget what God's law calls us to do and who the gospel calls us to be. We worship the God who brought slaves out of Egypt, the God who became one of us to show us God's love face to face and draw us back to God when humanity had grown fearful and lost our way. Fear is not God's chosen word, nor is fear God's chosen way. **Jesus is**. In Jesus we meet not a warm and fuzzy do-gooder, but a Savior, *the* Savior. Jesus

is the Savior who brings life to the withered and the worn-out and the left-out, the Savior who confronts those who peddle fear and challenges those who seek to thwart the life he brings, the Savior who gives his whole life for the sake of the whole world, regardless of time zone, social status, zip code, or citizenship. This Savior issues the original Whole Life Challenge. He challenges those who wear his name to follow him in here and out there, with all that we are and all that we do and all that we have. In response to his saving grace, in response to his giving his whole life for us, Jesus calls us to give our whole life to his work of doing good and saving lives—on the Sabbath and always. His challenge will stretch every one of us, if we're truly paying attention to him. And, by the grace of God, Christ's challenge will also heal us, draw us out of our withered ways, and shape us into a joy-filled, life-giving, Christ-like community in and for God's embattled and beloved world. For that is who God always intended and still intends for us to be.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.