

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, February 15, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE OUTSTRETCHED HAND"

Mark 1:41

Let me just jump right into today's story (Mark 1:40-45). Early in Jesus' public ministry a leper came to Jesus kneeling before him and begging him, "If you choose you can make me clean." Do I need to remind you what a cruel and loathsome disease leprosy is? It begins by attacking a person's skin, and moves on to destroy nerve endings and eventually the whole nervous system. A person who contracted leprosy would die in about 10 years. A Canadian who visited a leper colony in Africa a few years ago was amazed to see lepers reaching into pots of boiling water to retrieve cooking vegetables. They didn't feel anything. Eventually a lepers' limbs fall off because of the repeated damage which never really heals.

Now leprosy is somewhat, though not highly contagious, but the community in Jesus' day was taking no chances. Lepers were quarantined and if they did venture beyond the colony they had to walk around calling out "Unclean, unclean," thereby giving people a chance to keep their distance. Lepers had little social contact, except with other lepers. There is a cure for leprosy now but there was none back then. Lepers were considered the living dead. No doubt this leper had heard of Jesus' healing power and recognized that his only hope was in Jesus. Hence the kneeling and the begging. There was even a hint of faith in the man's words, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the leprosy left him.

Now Mark doesn't say it directly, but what Jesus did must have amazed bystanders. I read that when Lyndon Johnson was Vice President of the United States in the 1960's, he was known for plunging into crowds and pressing the flesh. On a visit to Pakistan Johnson enthusiastically "worked" the crowd, reaching beyond security guards to shake hands with people. At one point an American doctor gasped to a Secret Service man, "He's shaking hands with a leper!"

To an even larger degree, that's what the crowd must have been thinking about Jesus' action. By stretching out his hand to touch him, Jesus not only risked catching the disease; he identified with the leper and symbolically became

unclean himself. But Jesus couldn't help himself. He was moved with pity, which can also be translated as "righteous anger, indignation" at the power of this disease. Now the leper would have kneeled at a respectful distance, so Jesus really had to stretch out his hand and cover the gap between them. By his touch and his word Jesus made the leper clean and opened the way for him to resume a normal life again. Jesus figuratively brought him back from the dead. The man was so excited that he disobeyed Jesus' command to show the priest what had happened and to offer the appropriate thank offering. Instead he began to tell everyone what had happened to him. As word spread, Jesus couldn't even go into the towns anymore. He had to stay in the countryside and let people come to him; otherwise he would have been overwhelmed. But it really was a remarkable and unique action. "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"

This action is symbolic for what God was doing for the whole world in Jesus Christ. God is not an unfeeling God, way above us, distant from the world's troubles. God is moved with righteous anger at the power of sin and evil and death. God is moved by deep compassion at the broken state of his creation and of the human beings that he created and loves. So God did not stay within himself, but stretched across the gulf between Himself and this sinful world. This plan began in the heart of God before time began and then came to fruition when a holy child was born one night long ago in Bethlehem. In Jesus God reached out to our sinful and broken world, to identify with us, to take our sin and brokenness upon himself, to suffer and die for us, to rise again for us, to open the way for us to have new and eternal life, to bring us light and hope. Jesus is God's way of stretching out his hand and touching this world with loving, saving, healing, power. And God continues this ministry in the world.

Through Jesus God has stretched out his hand and touched us. That's what makes us Christians really, that God stretched out his hand and touched you and me with his love and grace and power. Somewhere, somehow the outstretched hand of Jesus touched us and we responded with faith and devotion. I don't know when or how it happened for you - perhaps at a moving worship service, perhaps in the comfort of a friend, or a Bible passage or the words of a hymn which spoke to you in a time of need. Or perhaps in the enthusiasm of a Sunday School teacher. Or in the love of your home and parents. Or as you heard the old, old story of Jesus and his love. Or as you saw a film which portrayed Christ's suffering for you on Calvary's Cross. Christ finds so many ways to stretch out his hand to touch us with grace and power and love.

I read a moving story of parents whose eighteen year old son died suddenly after striking a tree while skiing. He was a bright and promising young man, and

the parents were devastated. They were not believing or church-going people and they had little to comfort them in their grief. But a neighbour was a Christian and he called on them. They poured out their heart and showed him a photograph of their son. The Christian man broke down and cried with them. He offered a brief, halting prayer and left. What kind of a visit was that? No words of explanation, no glib words about God and suffering - just a man of faith sitting there crying. But that was exactly what they needed. Later they were instructed in the Christian faith. They were baptized and became members of the church. And it all happened because someone stretched out their hand in the name of Jesus and touched them in their time of great need.

But in some way, probably not so dramatically, it's happened to all of us. Somewhere, somehow, Christ stretched out his hand and touched you and me. And that is why we are Christians today, members of Christ's body, the church, because Christ stretched out his hand and touched us with the love and grace and power of Almighty God.

Indeed, Christ is still stretching out his hand to touch us, to touch those deep places where we bear the wounds and scars of life. Christ knows us better even than we know ourselves. And this very day he has come among us, stretching his hand toward you and me. All the blessings we really need are in that gentle yet powerful hand - love, acceptance, cleansing, peace, strength, courage.

A couple of weeks ago, the day after the Super Bowl, I saw an interesting picture in the newspaper which I cut out. If you watched the game you will recall that after the Steelers scored the go-ahead touchdown with less than a minute remaining, the Cardinals took the field for one last drive. This photo shows Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, the man they call Big Ben, 6'5", 250 pounds, on one knee on the sideline. Now he wasn't praying, rather he was grasping the hand of Steelers coach Mike Tomlin and hiding behind him, almost afraid to look at what was happening on the field. The photo was a little humorous, but spoke to me on several different levels.

Just set the football game aside. No matter how big or strong we are, we need the support of one another. We need someone to stand with us and beside us. We need someone we can hide behind, someone who is our shield and our refuge and our strength. When the pain or the challenges of life cause us to avert our gaze, when we are afraid, when we feel alone, when the world is against us, when we are rejected, when sin and guilt overwhelms us, when the billows roll, when the darkness of death enfolds us, there is a hand we can cling to, and that is the hand of Jesus Christ. And we don't have to reach far to find that hand, because Jesus Christ, moved with compassion, stretches out his hand

to touch us. His powerful, saving, living hand stretches across every gulf and every gap to find us. Indeed, Jesus Christ is stretching out his hand to touch us right now. Take hold of that hand by faith and cling to it for all you are worth. Let Christ be your refuge and your strength all of your days right up to that final day when God calls you home.

And let's never forget this. The living Christ stretches out his hand to touch others **through** us. The hand of Christ is for us and works through us. For the church is the body of Christ on earth and we are part of it.

In a European town a church was destroyed by a bomb in World War 2. As people searched through the rubble they found the statue of Christ which was still intact except for one thing. The hands had been broken off when the statue toppled over. And when the church was rebuilt the statue of Christ was put back in place but with the hands still missing. It served to remind all who saw the statue that we are the hands of Christ in the world today.

Every year our congregation puts a significant amount in our budget for outreach purposes. We join with other Christians in bringing the powerful and healing touch of Jesus Christ to souls in our community and around the world. Whether it is providing assistance to people through our food cupboard program back here, to bringing healing and Gospel hope to people with AIDS, to reaching unchurched youth, to supporting hospital chaplains, we are stretching across the gap with God's love. We are enabling Christ's outstretched hand. We cannot and dare not overlook this task. For I believe God blesses us when we bless others in the Name of Christ. And I know that even in these difficult days Christ is empowering us to stretch ourselves and to reach across the gap with God's love and grace. The answer as to why we do outreach is because Christ himself did it. And we belong to him. We are his representatives on earth. And what an empowerment, what an encouragement, what a model we have for our outreach. "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him."

