

STRETCH

Sermon delivered by Bishop R. Lawson Bryan June 3 during the Opening Worship Service of the 2018 South Georgia Annual Conference at the Jekyll Island Convention Center.

MARK 2:23-3:6

²³ One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ²⁵ And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶ He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." ²⁷ Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸ so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴ Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

THIS IS THE WORD OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD. THANKS BE TO GOD.

THIS IS THE GOSPEL LESSON FOR TODAY IN THE CHRISTIAN LECTIONARY. THAT MEANS THAT CHRISTIANS ALL OVER THE WORLD WILL HAVE READ THIS PASSAGE IN WORSHIP.

THIS PASSAGE INCLUDES THE STORY OF THE HEALING OF THE MAN WITH THE WITHERED HAND.

AND THE QUESTION IS:

WHY DID JESUS HEAL SOMEONE WHO WASN'T EVEN ASKING TO BE HEALED?

IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK THERE ARE TWELVE INSTANCES OF JESUS HEALING SOMEONE. IN EVERY OTHER INSTANCE JESUS HEALS THE PERSON AFTER THE PERSON CRIES OUT FOR HEALING OR AFTER FAMILY AND FRIENDS BEG JESUS TO HEAL THE PERSON.

BUT NOT HERE. THE MAN WITH THE WITHERED HAND SIMPLY CAME TO WORSHIP BECAUSE HE IS A FAITHFUL JEW. ON THE SABBATH HE WILL BE IN WORSHIP.

HE IS NOT THINKING ABOUT HIS WITHERED HAND AND NEITHER ARE THE MEMBERS OF HIS SYNAGOGUE.

LONG AGO HE LEARNED THAT COMING TO WORSHIP ON THE SABBATH DAY KEEPS HIM CONNECTED TO HIS IDENTITY AS A JEW. IN WORSHIP HE HEARS THE WORD OF GOD—THE TORAH—READ AND APPLIED TO HIS LIFE. IN WORSHIP HE SINGS THE SONGS OF THE FAITH AND HIS SPIRIT IS LIFTED. IN WORSHIP HE CONNECTS WITH OTHERS WHO ARE THEMSELVES SEEKING TO BE FAITHFUL TO GOD.

HE UNDERSTANDS THE TRUTH OF OUR THEME: ALIVE TOGETHER IN WORSHIP.

AS A CHILD HE ATTENDED VACATION SYNAGOGUE SCHOOL. LATER HE TAUGHT CHILDREN AND WORKED WITH THE YOUTH GROUP. AND HE IS A DELEGATE TO THE JEWISH VERSION OF ANNUAL CONFERENCE.

HE HAS LEARNED TO ADAPT TO THE WAY THINGS ARE WITH HIS WITHERED HAND.

AND NOW – HE WALKS INTO A CONTROVERSY BETWEEN JESUS AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES OVER WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT DO ON THE SABBATH.

LOOK, SAYS JESUS: THE SABBATH WAS MADE FOR HUMANKIND — NOT HUMANKIND FOR THE SABBATH.

THE SABBATH IS NOT MEANT TO BE A STRAIGHT JACKET — FULL OF RESTRICTIONS AND LIMITATIONS.

THE SABBATH IS FOR HUMANKIND — A DAY OF RESTORATION AND RENEWAL OF LIFE.

AND THEN HE SHOWS WHAT THIS MEANS: “COME FORWARD” HE SAYS TO THE MAN WITH THE WITHERED HAND.

“STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND.”

WELL THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT HE CAN'T DO, JESUS.

HIS HAND IS WITHERED. AFTER SO MANY YEARS, THE MUSCLES HAVE ATROPHIED. THE BLOOD FLOW IS REDUCED. THE RANGE OF MOTION IS RESTRICTED.

YOU ARE ASKING HIM TO DO SOMETHING HE CAN'T DO.

BUT WHEN JESUS SAYS, “STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND.”

HE STRETCHES IT OUT AND HIS HAND IS RESTORED!

THIS A STORY OF RESTORATION: WHATEVER WE TRY TO DO BECAUSE JESUS CALLS US, HE WILL GIVE US STRENGTH TO DO, HOWEVER IMPOSSIBLE IT IS UNDER OUR OWN POWER.

IN THE ACT OF STRETCHING OUT THE HAND, THE ABILITY TO STRETCH IT OUT IS GIVEN TO HIM.

POWER RETURNS TO THE MUSCLES, STIFFENED JOINTS ARE SET FREE, THE BLOOD RUNS IN FULL MEASURE THROUGH THE VEINS.

SO IT IS IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: THE POWER TO OBEY IS SUPPLIED WHEN THERE IS THE DESIRE AND EFFORT TO OBEY.

THE HARDNESS OF HEART IN THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WAS A GREATER WITHERING THAN THE PHYSICAL HAND OF THE MAN WHOM JESUS CALLED FORWARD.

JESUS DOES NOT WANT THE SABBATH TO WITHER INTO RULES AND REGULATIONS.

JESUS DOES NOT WANT RELIGIOUS LEADERS TO WITHER INTO HARDNESS OF HEART.

SO JESUS HEALS WITHERED HANDS — AND WITHERED HEARTS — AND WITHERED INSTITUTIONS, LIKE THE SABBATH.

AND HE DEMONSTRATES THIS THROUGH THE MAN WITH A WITHERED HAND.

“STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND.”

WHAT A ONE-WORD SUMMARY OF THE MINISTRY OF JESUS.

TO PETER AND ANDREW, JAMES AND JOHN, JESUS SAID: FOLLOW ME AND I WILL MAKE YOU FISH FOR PEOPLE — STRETCH.

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL SAID: WHY ARE YOU, A JEW, TALKING TO ME, A SAMARITAN. AND JESUS SAID: IF YOU KNEW, YOU WOULD ASK AND I WOULD GIVE YOU LIVING WATER. STRETCH.

TO ZACCHEUS, JESUS SAID: YOU COME DOWN, FOR I AM GOING TO YOUR HOUSE TODAY. STRETCH.

TO TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS, JESUS GAVE AN INVITATION TO EAT TOGETHER. STRETCH.

AND THEN JESUS STRETCHED OUT HIS ARMS ON THE CROSS — THAT EVERYONE MIGHT COME WITHIN THE REACH OF HIS SAVING EMBRACE.

STRETCH — WHAT A FRESH DESCRIPTION OF THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS.

JOHN WESLEY CAUGHT THIS VISION AND SAID TO THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND: WE HAVE THE HOLY SCRIPTURES, WE HAVE ORTHODOX THEOLOGY, WE HAVE SOARING CATHEDRALS, AND WE HAVE BEAUTIFUL MUSIC — BUT THE GREAT NEED WE HAVE IS TO STRETCH — TO REACH THOSE WHO ARE NOT COMING TO CHURCH AND WHO ARE NOT EVEN AWARE OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST.

TO THE CHURCH OF HIS DAY, JOHN WESLEY SAID: STRETCH.

THAT STRETCHING INCLUDED FORMING CLASS MEETINGS TO PROVIDE ACCOUNTABILITY IN LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.

AND IT INCLUDED PROVIDING SCHOOLS FOR THOSE WHO WERE NOT ALLOWED TO ATTEND REGULAR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS.

AND MEDICAL CARE FOR THOSE WHO WERE SUFFERING.

AND PROVIDING FOR THE PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF THE POOR.

BUT DO YOU RECALL THAT THERE CAME A TIME WHEN EVEN JOHN WESLEY HAD TO STRETCH?

GEORGE WHITFIELD SAID TO HIM: YOUR METHODIST CLASS MEETINGS ARE GOING WELL. AND PEOPLE ARE RESPONDING. BUT YOU NEED TO GET OUTSIDE THE WALLS OF THE CHURCH. YOU NEED TO GO PREACH IN THE FIELDS AND THE COAL MINES TO THOSE WHO WILL NEVER HEAR THE GOSPEL ANY OTHER WAY.

STRETCH, JOHN WESLEY.

AT FIRST WESLEY RESISTED. HE SAID IT WAS TACKY. HE REFUSED TO DO IT.

BUT EVENTUALLY HE WAS CONVICTED THAT HE NEEDED TO STRETCH AND BEGIN FIELD PREACHING.

HISTORIANS PAINT A PICTURE OF ONE SCENE IN WHICH JOHN WESLEY IS STANDING AT THE MOUTH OF A COAL MINE — PREACHING TO 4,000 MINERS COVERED IN COAL DUST. AND MANY ARE SAVED AND JOIN METHODIST SOCIETIES.

EVEN JOHN WESLEY NEEDED TO STRETCH.

AND THROUGH THE ROUSING METHODIST SINGING, LED BY CHARLES WESLEY

AND THROUGH THE DEVOTION OF THE LAY PREACHERS

AND THROUGH THE CLASS MEETINGS AND METHODIST SOCIETIES

AND FIELD PREACHING

THE METHODIST MOVEMENT **STRETCHED** THROUGHOUT ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND — AND CROSSED THE ATLANTIC OCEAN TO THE AMERICAN COLONIES.

STRETCH — IS THE STORY OF THE METHODIST MOVEMENT.

METHODISTS ARE THE STRETCH MARKS OF THE ANGLICAN TRADITION!

AND YET, I KNOW PERSONALLY HOW EASY IT IS TO STOP STRETCHING. YEARS AGO I WAS ENJOYING A FRUITFUL MINISTRY IN A LOVELY COUNTY SEAT TOWN OF ABOUT FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE. A CLOSE KNIT COMMUNITY. THEN I RECEIVED A CALL FROM MY DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT. THERE WAS A CHURCH IN MOBILE, ALABAMA FOR WHICH I SEEMED VERY WELL-SUITED. IN PRAYER I FOUND THAT I HAD AN OPENNESS TO THAT MOVE IF THE BISHOP AND CABINET FELT IT TO BE THE RIGHT APPOINTMENT FOR THE CHURCH AND FOR ME.

BUT IN A FEW DAYS A LADY FROM THE CHURCH CALLED AND SAID, "I HOPE YOU CAN HEAL THIS DIVIDED CHURCH." SCARED ME TO DEATH. I WRESTLED WITH THE GREEN PASTURES AND STILL WATERS IN WHICH I WAS THEN LIVING. EVEN CALLED THE BISHOP TO ASK IF WE SHOULD RECONSIDER.

NOW MY BISHOP WAS FROM THE SOUTH GEORGIA CONFERENCE. HIS NAME WAS HANDY HANCOCK. HE LISTENED TO MY CONCERNS BUT THEN TOLD ME THAT HE WANTED ME TO MOVE TO THAT CHURCH BECAUSE, HE SAID, "YOU ARE GOING TO GROW SOME NEW SPIRITUAL MUSCLES."

MY BISHOP CARED FOR ME ENOUGH TO DISRUPT MY COMFORTABLE LIFE AND STRETCH ME SO I WOULD BE OF GREATER USE TO THE WORK OF CHRIST.

AND IF I HAD NOT GONE TO MOBILE I WOULD HAVE MISSED MEETING ADAM. HE AND HIS WIFE HAD BEEN VISITING FOR A WHILE. HE CAME TO MY OFFICE ONE DAY AND SAID, "I DID NOT GROW UP IN THE CHRISTIAN FAITH. SO, TELL ME, HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS JESUS FELLOW?" I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE WITH HIM THE FULL STORY OF JESUS AND THEN TO INVITE ADAM TO BECOME A FOLLOWER OF JESUS. LATER, I BAPTIZED HIM AND RECEIVED HIM INTO MEMBERSHIP IN THAT CHURCH.

THIS IS ONLY ONE OF MANY BLESSINGS I WOULD HAVE MISSED IF HANDY HANCOCK HAD NOT SAID TO ME: STRETCH.

IT WAS 274 YEARS AGO THAT JOHN WESLEY HELD THE FIRST MEETING OF WHAT WOULD BE BECOME ANNUAL CONFERENCE.

LISTEN TO WESLEY DESCRIBE THAT FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE:

"IN JUNE 1744, I DESIRED MY BROTHER AND A FEW OTHER CLERGYMEN TO MEET ME IN LONDON, **TO CONSIDER HOW WE SHOULD PROCEED TO SAVE OUR OWN SOULS AND THOSE WHO HEARD US.** AFTER SOME TIME, I INVITED

THE LAY PREACHERS THAT WERE IN THE HOUSE TO MEET WITH US. WE CONFERRED TOGETHER FOR SEVERAL DAYS AND WERE **MUCH COMFORTED AND STRENGTHENED THEREBY.**"

ANNUAL CONFERENCE IS A COMFORT AND A STRENGTH.

A TIME TO STRETCH OUT OUR HANDS TO GOD IN WORSHIP.

A TIME TO STRETCH OUT OUR HANDS TO ONE ANOTHER — AND ARE WE YET ALIVE AND SEE EACH OTHER'S FACE.

AND A TIME TO BE SENT FORTH TO STRETCH OUT OUR HANDS TO OUR COMMUNITIES AND TO OUR WORLD. — IN OUR SENDING FORTH SERVICE I WILL PLACE IN YOUR HANDS AN OBJECT — AND ASK YOU TO USE IT ALL YEAR LONG — IT WILL BE A VERY POWERFUL REMINDER OF JESUS COMMAND: STRETCH.

MAY WE ALL GO BACK TO OUR OWN LOCAL CHURCHES AND STAND ON THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND SAY:

BROTHERS AND SISTERS, I HAVE A WORD FOR US — AND THAT WORD IS:

S T R E T C H !

LET US PRAY TOGETHER, SAYING:

LORD JESUS CHRIST,

**YOU STRETCHED OUT YOUR ARMS OF LOVE
ON THE HARD WOOD OF THE CROSS**

**THAT EVERYONE MIGHT COME
WITHIN REACH OF YOUR SAVING EMBRACE:**

**SO CLOTHE US IN YOUR SPIRIT THAT WE,
REACHING FORTH OUR HANDS IN LOVE,**

**MAY BRING THOSE WHO DO NOT KNOW YOU
TO THE KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE OF YOU;**

FOR THE HONOR OF YOUR NAME. AMEN.