



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

February 18, 2018

The God Who Stretches Out His Hand (Hope Restored Series)

Pastor Christopher Pan

Good morning. I'm Chris Pan. I'm on staff as Executive Director at the church.

It is a heartbreaking day in the life of our church and our community. We have experienced great loss and great sadness at the passing of Beebe Freitas. We will miss Beebe dearly. Beebe leaves a legacy of a life lived to its fullest and a family well-loved. She had an impact in our community like few other people. She was a truly a local and national treasure, and we grateful that in God's amazing grace, our paths crossed Beebe's for so long. We are all far better because of her.

We have experienced a lot of loss this past year. This is a time to give and receive comfort, not just from friends and family, but also from God who offers His peace and support. Our current sermon series is titled, "Hope Restored." And so we come to God today, looking for Hope in the midst of mourning...because we know that although we won't see Beebe again in this world, we'll see her in the next, and it will be glorious. We are heart-broken, but you know, Beebe is with Jesus right now—healed, restored, radiant. It is sunny where she is.

Our sermon today is "The God Who Stretches Out His Hand." Because that is the God whose presence we are in right now. A God who stretches out His hand to us and touches us. A God who speaks healing.

It is our tradition at First Prez to stand for the reading of the scripture. It is

to demonstrate reverence and awe for God and His communication to us. It is also a reminder that the speaker in this pulpit is not here to instruct you. We all stand together, as a congregation, to be addressed by the Holy Spirit speaking through the biblical text. The Word, who is Christ, speaks to us and we are all here to listen.

Will you please stand with me for the reading of the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1, verses 35 to 45.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, He got up and went out to a deserted place, and there He prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for Him. 37 When they found Him, they said to Him, "Everyone is searching for You." 38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." 39 And He went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

A leper came to Him begging Him, and kneeling he said to Him, "If you are willing, you have the power to make me clean." 41 Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 After sternly warning him, He sent him away at once, 44 saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." 45 But he went out and began

to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to Him from everywhere.

Please be seated, and please join me in prayer.

God, may your Word change us and transform us. May You comfort us now. May we encounter the living Jesus now, feel His healing touch, His love, His willingness to make us whole. We invite your Holy Spirit to do a mighty work in our lives. In Jesus' name, all God's people say, "Amen."

"Tell me a story," little kids say. So, today, we're going to tell you a story. And along the way, we'll talk about Prayer, and Purpose, and Trading Places. We hope you lose yourself in the narrative, and find yourself as a character in the story.

As we go through the sermon, ask yourself these two questions: 1. What is God saying to me? and, 2. What does He want me to do about it? 1. What is God saying to me? and, 2. What does He want me to do about it?

What we covered the last two weeks in sermons actually takes place in one day, according to Mark. It is a Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. Jesus is just starting his ministry. And Jesus goes to the synagogue in Capernaum and drives out a demon from a possessed man.

That afternoon, Jesus leaves the synagogue and goes to Simon's house, where Jesus heals Simon's mother in law, raising her up by the hand. That night, Saturday evening, the "whole town" brings their sick and possessed to Simon's house and Jesus heals them. I can only imagine late into the night. That's all one day.

That sets the scene for the first half of our passage today. After that incredibly packed first day of ministry—casting out a demon, healing Simon's mother-in-law, healing the town—Jesus sleeps in. Jesus takes it easy. Jesus takes some me time.

No. That's not what happens at all.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, He got up and went out to a deserted place, and there He prayed.

Jesus surely needed physical refreshment after His exhausting day, but He knew that He needed spiritual refreshment more.

We as a church spent the better part of 2017 reflecting on How to Pray. Week after week, our sermons focused on exercising our prayer muscles. Because we are following Jesus' example, we want to be a praying church. Because apart from God's presence, we can do nothing.

Jesus, after an exhausting day, sought to be in the Father's presence, to be renewed. To renew not just His endurance, but also His intimacy with the Father.

And Jesus instructs us to do the same. Because if prayer was important to Jesus, how much more important to us.

In the Gospel of John, 15:5, Jesus says: *"I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in Me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from Me you can do nothing."*

Pete Grieg, who spoke here last fall and started the 24/7 Prayer Movement,

offers this very practical advice about prayer.

He says: "The two most important tools for prayer are: the TV remote control at night and an alarm clock in the morning." TV remote control at night and alarm clock in the morning.

We spoke last year about a variety of additional practical tools to aid in prayer. I'll highlight just two now.

After you use the remote to turn off the TV, consider praying the Daily Examen—reviewing your day with God. And in the morning, try using the Pray As You Go app, which guides you through a 10 minute prayer and Bible reading. Links to both of these practical tools and the sermons explaining them can be found in our new church app—which we hope will be a useful resource for you to engage with your faith and this church. Info on how to get the app are inside the news bulletin.

We spoke a lot about prayer last year, so, now let's talk about Purpose.

36 And Simon and his companions hunted for Him. 37 When they found Him, they said to Him, "Everyone is searching for You." 38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." 39 And He went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons."

Imagine being one of the four disciples who are with Jesus now. Put yourself in their sandals. You're a fisherman one day, and then this rabbi, out of nowhere, comes along and invites you to follow Him. And then, on the first day, in one day, Saturday, He casts out a demon, heals your mother-in-law, and then heals the whole town late into the night. You would be so excited!

I think we can imagine their enthusiasm because we live in a world where success is measured by

popularity. A world of ratings and likes, and follows and retweets and viral sensations. Social Media Influencer is now a job title. If you doubt we live in world where success is measured by popularity, ask yourself, "What do the Kardashians do?"

So the disciples are excited about Jesus, who is so popular in Capernaum that after just one day, "Everyone is looking for Him." This Jesus is going to be huge!

And then Jesus does this totally inexplicable thing, if you are gauging success by popularity. Jesus says, "Let us go on." Let's leave this place where I am popular and go somewhere else.

Because Jesus doesn't measure success by popularity. Jesus measures success by purpose. Jesus has a purpose. Jesus is on a mission.

And His mission at this point, is to travel to other towns in Galilee—preaching the good news that the Kingdom of God has come near.

Later in the book of Mark, Jesus says this, which captures Jesus's purpose and is a dominant theme to the whole Gospel of Mark.

Mark 10:45: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Jesus knew His purpose...and it wasn't popularity. Jesus understands that the road to glory and true success leads straight to the cross on Calvary.

We as a church started our 40 day fast this past week. The fast marks the 40 days of Lent, the period of time leading up to Good Friday and Easter. The fast is our reminder that we walk this road with Jesus, a road of purpose, a road that leads to the cross. Because Jesus is always inviting us, "Let us go on..."

Author Jim Collins has a famous quote: “Good is the enemy of great.” Meaning that settling for good is what undermines greatness. Jesus, healing people in Capernaum - that’s a good rabbi. He could have been really popular in Capernaum. But His mission, His purpose, as Messiah, required Him to leave the popularity of Capernaum and travel towards the cross. This is the reason for Jesus’ somewhat strange instructions in these early verses to keep His identity a secret. Jesus has a mission and a purpose and a particular timeline, and it all goes through the Cross. And that reality of the cross is not the type of Messiah the first century Jewish community was looking for, or ready for.

So, can I ask a question? What is our purpose? What is our purpose as a church, and what does it require of us? Our church mission statement is to “Love God, love people and to reach the world for Jesus Christ.” Alpha and Rooted groups and the Marriage course are starting in a few weeks if you are searching for community. You have a flyer in your bulletin. We’ll be running Alpha this session at a Karaoke Lounge in town, because we understand our purpose. It might be comfortable staying where we are, doing what is familiar. But Jesus says to us, “Let us go on.”

What is our purpose, individually? What good thing in our lives is an enemy of the great, what might be getting in the way of God’s true purpose and mission for you? Can you hear Jesus’ invitation to you today: “Let us go on.” We are all on a journey of faith, and Jesus invites us to take the next step. “Let us go on,” He says to us. Take a moment, ask yourself: What is God saying to me right now? And what does He want me to do about it?

Jesus, travels around Galilee, for weeks, maybe months, preaching and casting out demons.

That brings us to the last section of our passage today, when Jesus heals a leper.

40 A leper came to Him begging Him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you are willing, you have the power to make me clean.” 41 Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing. Be made clean!” 42 Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

A man with leprosy comes to Jesus and kneels before Him. Imagine yourself as this leper. At this point, I would usually show you photos of people with leprosy, so you could understand how gruesome Hansen’s disease is. But, I will spare you, because I am sure you can already imagine how gruesome leprosy is. The disfiguring skin sores and lesions. The missing toes and fingers and hands and feet. The smell of diseased flesh.

A few months ago I told the Bible story in Kids church downstairs. And that story was about the 10 lepers who are healed, but only one comes back to say thank you to Jesus. So I asked the kids, “Do you know what a leper is?” And in each service, a kid would raise his or her hand and say, “Yeah, it’s a big cat with spots.” Yeah, that’s a leopard. This is a leper. So that’s on me for failing to enunciate.

In the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament, there are two long chapters instructing the Israelites how to treat people with leprosy, and the related purification rituals. Chapters 13 and 14. It’s over 3,000 words long and would take 30 minutes to read. So let’s get started – Leviticus Chapter 13.

Just kidding. I won’t read it all. I’ll just read two verses.

Leviticus 13:45-46: “45 The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” 46 He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

Do you hear how heartbreaking these verses are? The person with leprosy has to wear torn clothing and intentionally let their hair be disheveled, as visual warnings to other people. Wherever they go, as they enter into rooms, or crowds, they have to shout, “Unclean! Unclean!” as a warning. And they live alone, outside the town, outside community. The law forbids anyone else from touching a leper, or else they also will be considered unclean.

Can you imagine doing that everywhere you went? Go grab lunch at Koolau Kitchen after the service and yell “Unclean! Unclean!” as you enter. Go pick up your kids downstairs: “Unclean! Unclean!” Go to work tomorrow, and yell “Unclean! Unclean!” as you enter your office, and the conference room, and the lunch room. Go to class tomorrow, and be sure you yell “Unclean! Unclean!” before the teacher starts class.

There are good reasons for the ceremonial laws set out in Leviticus. But can you imagine the burden and isolation on this man. Imagine you are this man as he hears about Jesus. This new rabbi, with authority, traveling around Galilee – preaching about the kingdom of God, the forgiveness of sins, and healing all kinds of people.

The leper would have violate the law to approach Jesus. So the man with leprosy has a decision to make, just like we have a decision to make.

Because, in the Bible, leprosy is a symbol for sin and fallenness in our own lives. It is a graphic illustration—the outward physical manifestation of leprosy is a metaphor for the inward spiritual sickness and brokenness in our hearts. And so I think the leper, and we sinners, have three choices:

Choice One: The leper could downplay or minimize the leprosy, and not seek out Jesus.

He could look at his disfigurement and his missing fingers and say, “You know what, it’s not so bad. I don’t need to go to Jesus.”

For some reason, this makes me think about the Black Knight from the old Monty Python movie. It’s a knight in this battle, who in ridiculous manner, keeps getting limbs cut off, but he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge reality. At one point his opponent points out he’s got no arms, and the Black Knight looks at his missing limbs and says, “It’s just a flesh wound.”

It’s funny because it is ridiculous, thinking about the Black Knight or the leper, looking at his disfigurement and saying, “It’s not so bad. I don’t need help.”

But then I realize that that is exactly what I do, and what we do, when it comes to the brokenness in our lives. We look at the pain, or anger, or envy, or pride, or selfishness in our lives and say, “It’s not so bad.” I don’t need to go to Jesus with this. We look at the hurt, or gossip, or lust, or addiction, or gluttony, or greed and say, “It’s just a flesh wound.” That’s choice one – we minimize the sin in our lives, and we don’t go to Jesus.

Choice 2: I think the leper could have made the opposite choice as well. He could have catastrophized—thought it is worse than it actually is. He could have looked at his disease and said, “There is no hope for me. It’s a catastrophe. I’m too far gone, I’m beyond reach. It’s hopeless. Jesus can’t do anything for me because I’m too terrible.”

And sometimes we do the same. Instead of minimizing sin in our lives, we maximize the sin in our lives. We think, “There is no way that God could forgive me for THIS.” I meet a lot of non-Christians who think like this. They make jokes like, “There is no way that I can go to church. It’ll be struck by lightning if I walked in.” They think that they are beyond the reach of God. I think we do

the same. We’re just like Adam and Eve. In our brokenness, we are ashamed, and we hide from God thinking that we are beyond his reach.

Choice 3. There’s a jargon, slang phrase, “Come to Jesus.” Have a “come to Jesus” meeting, or “come to Jesus” talk. “Come to Jesus” moment. And it means it’s going to be a real honest meeting, or real honest talk. It means to face the cold, brutal reality.

And it’s totally theologically accurate here. The leper chooses Choice 3. The leper is honest about his disease and his need, and comes to Jesus.

Can you picture the leper yelling. “Unclean! Unclean!” as travels from the outskirts of the town into the town to fall at Jesus’ feet?

And what does he ask Jesus? Does he ask Jesus to HEAL him? No. He says: *“If You are willing, You have the power to make me clean.”* (Mark 1:41) Not heal me, but make me CLEAN.

A man, walking around, crying out, “Unclean! Unclean!” everywhere he went. That’s what he asks Jesus. To be made clean.

Can we be honest about our brokenness, and come to Jesus? Can we approach Jesus and say, “If You are willing, You have the power to make me clean.”

How does Jesus respond? Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing. Be made clean!”

The word compassion here is derived from the word “guts”. Jesus is moved in His guts. And so He stretches out His hand and touches the leper.

We have a God, who is not a dispassionate guru on a mountaintop. We have a God who stretches out His hand to us to touch us.

Let’s look at this passage, and see what it DOES NOT say. The account does NOT say: Moved with compassion, Jesus said to him, “I am willing. Be made clean!” THEN Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him.

Wouldn’t that make a lot more sense. If you’re going to heal the leper anyway, heal him first, and then touch him. Touch him when he’s clean and whole, and there’s not bits of leper everywhere. Remember, the ceremonial law forbade touching lepers.

We had the flu hit our house this week. But we went to the doctor early and got medication, so it wasn’t that bad. But while I was at the doctor’s, I asked her, “You know, there’s a flu epidemic. How do you not have the flu all the time?” And she said, “Wash your hands.” So, another good, practical tip. Wash your hands. Don’t touch your face. And, what she said next is what I found fascinating: she said she keeps a Zone of Protection when she’s seeing patients. She’ll stay a few feet away from the patients, so she doesn’t get sneezed on or coughed on.

And I thought, that’s genius. That’s how she’s a good doctor, and can keep on treating patients every day and not get sick.

But good is the enemy of great. And we don’t have a GOOD Savior, who keeps a Zone of Protection from us. We have a GREAT Savior. We have a Messiah who stretches out His hand to us. We have a Savior who doesn’t wait until the leper is clean to touch him, but stretches out His hand and touches him while he is still a leper.

Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing. Be made clean!”

Our Messiah stretches out His hand to us, in all of our human brokenness and need.

He stretches His hand towards Parkland Florida, and Sandy Hook, Connecticut and Washington DC and into our lives here and now. He doesn't shy away from us, but stretches His hand to us, again and again and again. And He asks us to stretch out our hands to a broken world and towards people in need, again and again and again. Because His purpose is the same today as it was 2000 years ago, that His Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

One last point that is subtle, but so significant. Jesus reaches out, touches the leper. He restores his dignity, restores him to community. Makes him clean. And the leper is immediately healed. Then Jesus tells the leper to not tell anyone. But the leper is irrepressibly enthusiastic. He tells everyone. Can you picture him shouting, "I'm clean! I'm clean!"

45 But [the man] went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to Him from everywhere.

As a result of the man speaking about his healing, Jesus can't go into the town anymore. He has to stay out in the country. Other translations say, Jesus stayed out in the lonely places, the desolate places, the deserted places.

Did you catch it? It's the core of the gospel, right here as we end Mark Chapter 1. Jesus trades places with the leper. Jesus trades places with the leper.

At the beginning of this account, the leper is an outcast, confined to the outskirts of town, living outside of society, living in isolation. But he meets Jesus, is healed, is made clean, and is reintegrated into society and community. By the end, he is in the middle of town talking about Jesus.

Jesus, who begins in the middle of the city, in the middle of multiple cities all throughout Galilee, after meeting the

leper, is now isolated and confined to the outskirts of town. Jesus trades places with the leper.

We are on this 40 day Lenten journey to Good Friday and Easter, and it is a journey to the cross.

And it's on the cross that Jesus trades places with us. We are spiritual lepers and outcasts in isolation and alienation from God. And Jesus brings us into the very presence of God, by taking our place. We can stand in God's presence, because Jesus chose to leave God's presence, to atone for our sins on a cross, to be forsaken and made an outcast in our place.

Just like the leper is made clean, we are made clean:

Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, let us settle the matter, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."

The leper is made clean and our red sin is made white, because Jesus takes our place:

Isaiah 53:5 "But He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the punishment that made us whole, and by His bruises we are healed."

Let's end where we started, with prayer. What is God saying to you? What does he want you to do about it?

Let's take a few moments to pray and reflect on the three choices before the leper, and before us, about whether we approach Jesus. You may minimize and think your brokenness isn't that bad. Or you may catastrophize and think that your brokenness is somehow so bad that you are beyond God's reach. Or you may be eager to come to Jesus right now.

Wherever you are right now, Hear and believe the good news of the gospel:

Moved with compassion, Jesus stretches out His hand towards you, touches you, and says to you, "I am willing. Be made clean!"

Let's respond to Jesus in silent reflection now.