

2nd Wednesday of Ordinary Time. 1/20/2021

**Is it lawful on the sabbath to save a life rather than to
destroy it?**

Is it lawful on the sabbath to save a life rather than to
destroy it? The question invites a conversation on the law
and how it affirms the life of the Jewish people. This is
what Jesus asks the scribes and the Pharisees in the
middle of today's Gospel. But there is no conversation.

They say nothing. They are watching Jesus, trying to catch
him saying or doing something they can use to accuse him.

This incident is the culmination of a process. It is the fifth
and final story of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees,
in the Gospel of Mark.

Going all the way back to the start of the conflict, they had started by “questioning in their hearts” the words of Jesus about forgiveness of sins. Later they questioned with words his behavior and that of his disciples, about eating with sinners and about fasting. Then they engaged in a discussion about working on the sabbath when his disciples plucked ears of grain in the grainfield. The temperature rises, the conflict escalates, and at this point there is little interest in dialogue.

Is it lawful on the sabbath to save a life rather than to destroy it? At the end of our reading, we hear that on this sabbath both of those paths were taken, salvation and destruction. The Pharisees resolve that they will destroy a life, putting Jesus to death. The initial questioning in their hearts and thoughts against Jesus grew step by step to

hostility and estrangement. As we see this process, it is helpful to ask ourselves, if by chance we have let grow thoughts and feelings against some group or individual, and now we are closed to dialogue.

Jesus wants to heal us, as he healed the man with the withered hand. Some say that restoring the hand of the man allowed him to work and earn a living, and in this way his life was saved. Beyond all the practical work we do with our hands, our hands are central to gestures and expressions of our social life. They bring us closer to each other. When meeting somebody, we would stretch out our hand to introduce ourselves and acknowledge each other. We stretch out our hand as a sign of friendship, or to welcome into our group, or to seal an agreement. We

stretch out our hand to ask for help, and we do so also to provide help.

So, restoring the withered hand is not only about earning a living, but it is also about belonging to a community and about the ability to give and to receive. It is the opposite of estrangement and destruction.

We come to Jesus trusting in his power to heal us. Today we can place in his hands our unloving thoughts, rooted in pride, envy, selfishness or insecurity, which we have let grow in our minds and cause suffering. We can ask him to heal the divisions we have helped create. Strengthened by his Body in Holy Communion, we can ask him to help us stretch out our hand in service to our families and our communities, to be a channel for God's love.