

Stretch

Psalm 143:6-8, Matthew 12:9-13, Acts 4:29-30

July 7, 2024 Series: *One Good Word*

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church, San Rafael, CA

*I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. (Selah)
Answer me quickly, O God; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me,
or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.*

Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust.

Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul. Psalms 143:6-8

He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, "Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. He said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other.

Matthew 12:9-13

"And now, Holy One, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." Acts 4:29-34

Stretch. Put your hands up and stretch.

Stretch. Read the version of the Lord's Prayer we will be using during communion.

Maybe that stretches your spiritual muscles, opening to this
Mystery of divine love and grace.

Stretch. I think about people who are unhoused in San Rafael and people who do not have enough food. How am I called, how are we called to offer help and hope that feeds and shelters – immediate & long term

Stretch.

Psalm 143

מָרַשׁ Paw-rash. In the Hebrew dictionary it is a verb meaning to spread out, spread, stretch, fly, to properly spread wings. A psalm, a song, a prayer for help. Considered one of the seven penitential Psalms.

Live-giving spirituality means remembering who God is and what God has done.. Psalm 143 a Psalm of David . David or one of his writers is mindful of God's past mercy and turns to God for help with those memories alive. His soul is parched, but he remembers

God's promise, spoken through Isaiah, to make parched land come to life and coax blooms from the desert. Parched land – like last week.

The Psalmist says that unnamed enemies have prevailed and they are in need of God's compassion. Help me. Don't let me fall into the pit of depression; “

“I stretch out my hands to you.” A recognition he cannot do this alone. A need, a longing,

Times we long for God's guidance, love, comfort, mercy. We pray “Help me. Help us.” We are stretching, reaching. Remind me of your goodness, O God.

Matthew 12:9-13

This is a key text in the gospels to understand Jesus' relation to his tradition, particularly to the law. Jesus' operating principle is that the Sabbath (all of the law and the rituals of holiness) was created for humanity, and not the other way around.

One theology is that ‘humanity was made for the Sabbath’ - that God created the purity laws and humanity needs to live up to it or else we are lost. In that theology, God is chiefly known as holy, and humans have to achieve a certain level of holiness – through following laws or practicing purity rituals - to be acceptable to God.

The alternative theology, which Jesus poses here, is that ‘the Sabbath was made for humanity.’ In that sense, God is chiefly known as love and the laws and purity rituals are for humanity's own good. Or, even better, they offer ways that humanity can respond to God's grace with gratitude. There is a relationship.

The man stretched out his hand and was healed.

Stretching brings healing, restoration, hope.

Same verb as Jesus stretching out his hand to heal man with leprosy Matthew 8.

Stretch to see how God is at work. Not by rules and regulations, but grace.

Acts 4

Peter and John have been in jail and are brought before the Council in Jerusalem. The authorities have a dilemma. Teaching people about Jesus and message and resurrection. Peter had healed a someone who was crippled and begging. Stand up and walk. This power of healing and hope flowed through Jesus and now through followers. To bring wholeness.

Stretch. I want to share 3 brief stories about stretching from The Christian Century. (*)

1) In the waning evening light, I stared with awe at the vast expanse of trees surrounding my house. Our electricity had been out for 16 hours, my husband was

working out of state, the roads were unsafe for travel, and all of my electronic devices were dead... I'd lived in the Texas Hill Country for 15 years, but this was my first ice storm—one I would weather alone.

Our oaks and cedars were so heavily laden with ice that 300-year-old branches were bent and grazed the ground. ... I felt a strange gray stillness enveloping me ... in the relentless creaking of trees stretched to their limits.

Every few minutes, the intensity of the scene was broken by a sound like an echoing gunshot, signaling that another ancient branch had succumbed to its icy burden. Each fracture resounded like a resolute declaration of surrender, as if the trees shed their ice to reclaim their truest essence. It reminded me of the delicate balance between strength and fragility.

The scene began to overwhelm me. My yard brought to light the condition of my heart. I too was frozen, weighted down, and stretched by grief well beyond my capacity. One year earlier, we lost our oldest daughter. I felt the weight of grief every day.

...My self-reflective moment was broken when I noticed a flurry of movement beneath the trees. Curious, I leaned in and saw hundreds of birds carpeting the ground. In stark contrast to the straining trees, they appeared jubilant and free as they consumed some unexpected feast provided by the storm.

With a deep breath, I felt a holy invitation to acceptance. Acceptance that parts of me, **stretched by the frozen weight of grief, would be broken away**—with the possibility of creating a fiery warmth in the future. Acceptance that being fully present in deeply painful moments can lead to expanded internal capacity and strength. Acceptance that by leaning into the stretch of a weighty storm I might catch glimpses of joy, abundance, and freedom.

2) “Make sure you arrive at the barre warmed up and ready to dance,” my ballet teacher said. We only had an hour and 20 minutes twice a week to work on our technique, which meant we didn't have time to waste on something like stretching that could be done individually. When I could, I arrived 20 minutes early to put on my pointe shoes, do floor stretches, and loosen my hips at the barre. I wanted to do my best because I was definitely not the most talented dancer in the room.

“Point, flex, point, close,” my teacher's voice would ring out over the piano. “Make sure you are stretching those toes as far as you can, both forward and back.” And keep breathing.

Away from the barre, in the middle of the room, my torso would tip because my core wasn't strong enough. I didn't have the flexibility because I hadn't spent the time stretching.

I didn't become a professional dancer. But I do remember many of the lessons my teacher taught. Even when I make an unexpected turn, when I forget the dance, when the music stops unexpectedly, when something goes wrong, I remember to stretch and keep breathing.

3) My wife had a stroke and then needed physical therapy.... Sometimes the two of us would sit in her room quietly talking as we had throughout our marriage about how far we had come together, where we now found ourselves, and what was in store for us. We planned together and prayed together, and we celebrated both progress and small miracles.

One of those small miracles was stretch bands. These are essentially large rubber bands, three or four feet or more, of various strengths designated by color. To us they were laughably simple—but to our surprise, they worked! From the earliest days after her stroke, Jeanne was given bands and taught how to use them. For example, place one under your foot, hold onto it with both hands, and try to straighten your leg. Try a stronger one with your strong leg. Now try it with your weak leg. Try them on your arms. Try them sitting up. Or standing. Pull, relax, pull again. How do you feel?

In many ways it was the stretch bands, of all things, that offered strength and hope.

Holy One invites us to stretch. In your season of life, how do you stretch? Mind, body, soul, spiritual life, new and deeper experiences of the Divine? In these challenging times in our lives, our country and the world, how might we be invited to stretch to become resilient, courageous, centered?

May we make room for the Spirit to flow. May we move forward in love to witness the ever-changing, ever-redeeming, ever-reforming, and ever-reshaping kin-dom of God that is being established for all of creation. May we be bold as a community, a church, moving as the ever-stretching hands, feet, arms, legs, hearts and body of Christ in the world. Amen.

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