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Open Your Hands Deuteronomy 15:7-11
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“You open your hand, satisfying the desires of every living thing.” Psalm 145:16 TNIV

I would like to talk with you today about something very personal – your hands. Hands are fascinating. They are capable of acts of intricate and amazing dexterity such as performing surgery or playing a musical instrument. They are capable of acts of great force and power like lifting objects weighing hundreds of pounds or throwing something very far. They can be used to deliver a violent blow or for the most gentle caress. They are used for more purposes and in more ways than we may imagine. One of the first things we are told as children is to “Wash your hands before you eat.” As an adult we are always reminded of the importance of washing our hands to prevent the spread of germs, illness, or disease. Hands can be used for the earthiest of tasks like changing a diaper or picking up after your dog or for the most sacred of purposes such as receiving the bread and cup that remind us of the death of Jesus on the cross for our sake.

There is a saying, “I know it like the back of my hand.” How well do we know our hands, really? Without looking, can you picture your hands? What do they look like – could you draw them? Where are the freckles, the scars, the calluses? Which joints are swollen? Which finger is no longer content to go straight and is heading off in a new undesired direction?

Look at your hands. Did you look at the back of your hands or your palms? What do you see when you look at your hands? Think of all the things your hands have held. Think of the people who have touched your hand through the years of your life. Remember grandparents or grandchildren who held your hand as you crossed a street or walked on the beach. Think of holding the hand of someone you were growing to love and remember the electricity that flowed through your body and made your heart race. Can you imagine even a little of the emotion, love, friendship, comfort, and playfulness that your hands have conveyed to other people through the years? Try to picture how your hands have grown and changed. Those of you who are like me can think of how hard it would be to speak without using our hands!

Close your hand and make a fist. Do you feel your muscles tightening and tensing up your arm? When do we make a fist? When we're angry, mad, scared, or feeling threatened. When we want to hold onto something and not lose our grip. In baseball, you don't want to hold the bat too tightly or you tense up and your arms don't extend as well through the swing. I had a coach tell me if you can see too much of the whites of your knuckles you are holding on too tightly. Sometimes in life we hold on too tightly, we live with white knuckles and wonder why we feel tense and up tight.

An 80's rock song by 38 Special included the advice, “So hold on loosely, but don't let go. If you cling too tightly, you're gonna to lose control.”

Do you still have your hands in a fist? If you do, you may find they are starting to get tired. If you try to keep your hand in a fist you will find your hand gets tired eventually no matter how fit you are. Your hands want to relax.

Open your hand and extend your fingers as far as you can, can you feel the muscles in your hand and forearm working and stretching? This also takes energy and gets tiring.

What is the most relaxing way for your hands to be? Neither stretched to the max nor closed in a fist, but open in a position to receive or give without holding on too tightly. Listen to what Deuteronomy 15 has to say about our hands and how we are to use them, in particular with regard to our neighbors.

“If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. 8 You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. 9 Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,” and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. 10 Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. 11 Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” - Deuteronomy 15:7-11 (NRSV)

This wonderful passage from Deuteronomy contrasts two ways of living – being tight-fisted or open handed. It is difficult to reach out to other people with our hand in a fist. No one in a cliffhanger scene in a movie says, “Quick, grab my fist!” It’s always, “Grab my hand!” We can be tight-fisted or open handed in every aspect of our life, not just in regard in giving of our financial resources to those in need which is what this passage is about and what we usually think of first. Life, love, and time are three of our greatest gifts - we are all given those three things, though not in equal measure - to cling to with our hands closed tightly or to share with open hands. Joyce Rupp wrote, “A generous heart freely gives and can live without some of the material things we think are so desperately needed. A generous heart is also one that that can give freely of the greater, nonmaterial gifts such as compassion, understanding, patience and forgiveness.”

Almost any story of Jesus in the Gospels portrays him living with open hands. He often reaches out his hands and lays them gently on people to heal them. Mark 3:1-6 says, “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 incident starkly displays the difference between living with hands that are open to help, heal, share, and bless as Jesus does and hands that are closed, hard, and tight-fisted. Jesus enters the synagogue sees a man with a withered hand and immediately says to him “Come forward.” Jesus engages with the man. This is something we can do if we live with an open heart and open hands. We can treat the person behind the counter at the grocery store, the donut shop, or the drug store like a

human being and not just a cog in a machine to serve us. We can live with an open heart that beats with the thought that virtually every person we encounter is carrying around heartache, pain, worry, fear, or anxiety we may know nothing about. Remembering this can help us live with open hands that give freely of our life, love, time, and resources.

Or we can be like the Pharisees who see people in need and sit back without lifting a finger to help and then respond with rage and anger when Jesus does because they are holding on so tightly to tradition that they miss what God is doing in the moment. From the Pharaoh in Exodus who wouldn't let God's people go to the opponents of Jesus in the Gospels, there is almost nothing that makes God angrier than hardness of heart or hands.

You cannot reach as far if your hands are closed. You cannot receive if your hands are closed. That is why God calls us to live with open hands.

One of the things I love about our church is that I believe we are trying to be God's people living with open hands. This time of the year especially our hearts and hands are open as we give to support our missionaries, work on the Holiday Fair to bless others in need, as we put together Shoe Boxes for Operation Christmas Child, prepare a meal of thanks for the business owners and leaders in our community, as we open our hands to give back to God our tithes and pledges, as we help friends in need like Donna and Sean and make their home accessible. These are all ways we live with open hands and open hearts as the Bible teaches us.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, theologian, and ethicist (1813-1855) wrote, "The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we as Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined."

The passage from Deuteronomy urges us not to be stingy, tight-fisted, or cheap. We never like it when we feel someone is cheap with us. Have you noticed how so many products are so much smaller than their packaging – like granola bars, for example? Or how some food items are staying the same in cost but they are giving you less tuna or ice cream? Savvy shoppers see such things.

Or what about when you open a cereal box? Doesn't it bug you when you open a cereal box and find it only two-thirds full? The manufacturer always has a disclaimer that it is packaged by weight, not by volume. But why waste all that paper and cardboard on containers that are much bigger than they need to be just to try to deceive consumers? Why can't we buy a box of cereal that is filled to the brim?

When God opens the cereal box of our life, how full does God find it? Are we living generously with open hands and open hearts? I hope you will prayerfully consider how God would have you support the Lord's work through this church in the coming year so that we can continue to be a source of hope and encouragement to many people. St. Anthony wrote: "Some of those who stop in inns are given beds, while others having no beds stretch themselves on the floor and sleep as soundly as those in beds. In the

morning, when night is over, all alike get up and leave the inn, carrying away with them only their own belongings. It is the same with those who tread the path of this life: both those who have lived in modest circumstances, and those who have had wealth and fame, leave this life like an inn, taking with them no worldly comforts or riches, but only what they have done in this life, whether it be good or bad.”

In other words, it doesn't matter how tightly we cling to anything in this life, because we won't be taking any thing with us that we have been holding on to when we go. All we can take with us is that which we have given away. Jesus lived with open hands, reaching out healing, touching, blessing, comforting and even in his death on the cross he died with open hands reaching out to us all – longing to touch us with the Father's all embracing love.

In the nice book, *Hands of My Father: A Hearing Boy, His Deaf Parents and the Language of Love*, Myron Uhlberg writes about growing up in New York City in the 1930's and 40's with two deaf parents. “From the time I was a small child, I was struck by how often my father would hold me, for no reason that I could ever understand. On my block, this was quite noticeable, even to a young kid like me. In that time, men had the socially accepted role of ‘breadwinner.’ They were not the nurturers of our young lives. That role was reserved for our mother...But this was not the case with my father. At the end of his workday, he would drop to his knees when he saw me, and hold me closely, as if I had been lost, and then found.

“After that first embrace he would hold me at arm's length, looking me over long and deeply. On his face I would detect a look of mild surprise, a look I could never decipher. No signs were exchanged between us. All that I needed to understand how much my father loved me was the feel of his arms around me. He spoke, and the language I heard was the language of his touch.”

God is like that. God is like a loving Father who drops to a knee, looks deeply into our eyes as if we had been lost and then found. All you need to understand about how much God loves you is to know that divine loving arms long to wrap around you and hold you close.

Please open your hands and rest them on your legs with your palms facing up and open to receive as I pray.

Giving God, help us to picture in our hands the wealth of gifts you have given to us, help us to hold them loosely, and shape our hearts in such a way that we can live with open hands and freely share of your gifts without fear, worry, or anxiety. Help us reflect on the people of our life who are special gifts to us, who have opened their hands and hearts to us. As we think of how special they are to us enable us to hear and believe that you want us to be that kind of person for others. May we always remember no one ever becomes poor by giving and living with open hands.

Blessing Jesus, you have opened to us the scriptures, and have been known to us in the breaking of bread: Stay with us, we pray, that we may go in the strength of your presence and your truth all our journey through, and may you always hold us in the palm of your hand.