

Unclenching our Fists
Preached by
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For Reflection: *"Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend."*

Melody Beattie

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 65

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion;
and to you shall vows be performed.

To you who hear prayer, all flesh shall burn because of their sins.

When our transgressions prevail over us, you forgive them.

Blessed are those whom you choose and bring near, to dwell in your courts!
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, Your holy temple!

By dread deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation,

who is the hope of all the ends of the earth, and of the farthest seas;

who by your strength established the mountains, being girded with might;

who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples; so that those who dwell at earth's farthest bounds are in awe at your signs; you make the morning and the evening resound with joy.

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide its grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges. softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty; the tracks of your chariot drip with fatness.

The pastures of the wilderness drip, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

Epistle Reading: Ephesians 5:1-2

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself in fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Meditation : Unclenching our Fists

There is a story about told Fiorello LaGuardia, mayor of NYC during the worst days of the Depression. On one bitterly cold January night, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest part of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge and took over the bench himself. An old woman in ragged clothes was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted his family, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving.

But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a bad neighborhood, your Honor. She's got to be punished to teach others a lesson."

LaGuardia told the woman, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or

ten days in jail." Even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his hat, saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." The court room employees, police officers, petty thieves, lawyers and observers, who had just paid their fine, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

I can say I've never heard of a congregation giving a standing ovation to the stewardship committee for reminding us of the needs of the world (We might want to think about being first:-)) yet, I suspect most of us feel as though sitting in that courtroom and in church on Stewardship Sunday are a lot alike.

That couldn't be farther from the truth. To be sure, Scripture often paints an image of God as our judge. We hear a clear and consistent call to compassion and justice; a call to which money is often a necessary response. However, we sit in a court of far different venue than Mayor LaGuardia's, as admirable as it was.

In the courtroom where faith finds us, the difference is this: the judge provides not only the original \$10.00, but everyone's \$.50 fine, as well as all the other money they have; the judge provides the bread, and the shop the bread came from, the clothes we wear, indeed everything we have. Rather than having anything taken away from us, everything is given to us.

For the most part, we American Christians don't really believe that. We are embedded in a culture that tells us we are self-made—that what we have we have earned for ourselves. We forget the ways we are helped along the way. How many of us had no families to nurture us? No teachers or coaches to guide us? Grew our own food? Bought our own clothes? Had no scholarships? No assistance from parents? No kindly relative slipping us a few dollars? Got no hand up from any family or church or friend when we needed it? Never spent a dollar we didn't earn? Got a great job simply because we happened to be in the right place at the right time or because we knew someone who knew someone? Had no pastor to comfort us? No spouse to encourage us? No child to help us in our old age? Had no rights and privileges of citizenship? Have no safe places to live, clean water, and adequate health care? No freedom and opportunity for changing our lives?

All those things came to us from God through others. And, if there are any among us who had none of those things, they may be closer to being "self-made" than the rest of us—BUT—none of us are self-made! The talents we have and the lives we have been given are themselves gifts of God. We forget that we live and move and have our being in an ever-flowing stream of God's grace. When we forget, we can think that what we have is ours for our enjoyment alone and so wait to be fined into a response to a hurting world.

If forgetfulness is one thing that tightens our grasp on what we have, I suspect fear is another. We live in a world where terrorism is in the headlines, the media shriek stories about pandemics, domestic violence, product shortages, a groaning planet, inflation, extraordinary levels of gun violence, rising health costs, dwindling retirement savings and a broken political system. We are afraid if we don't take care of ourselves and our own, no one will. So, we protect ourselves with a barricade of purchases—we stock up, (and the pandemic may have made that practice worse) save up, store up, to secure a future we cannot guarantee—all with the gnawing sense that even this is not enough. Our enjoyment of what we have is shadowed by with worry that somehow its stream will dry up. Our hands clench around what we have, fearful that someone or something will wrench it from our grasp. We cling for dear life to what we have. The problem is that's not a dear life and certainly not the life abundant for which Christ came.

Together, forgetfulness of God's grace and fears of its limits lead to spiritual contracture of our hands and our hearts. We clench our hands in painful spasm around what we have so tightly that it is eventually impossible for us to open them either for our own enjoyment or in generosity. If we cling long enough and tightly enough, our ability to feel compassion and to respond to others declines—our heart's muscle contracts into a cramped spasm of insensitivity. Such contracted living is painful, crippled living. It brings no joy and bears no hope into the world. The good news is this: There is therapy for the spiritual contracture of our hands and hearts.

The therapy is the practice of gratitude. We have spent much of the past month flexing our gratitude muscles, loosing the cramped tendons of fear, and opening our spirits to greater awareness of what we do have.

Beloved children of God, with the habit of gratitude we can live in love as Christ loved us; we can be imitators of God, making fragrant offerings for the sake of the whole world. Let us accept the psalmist's invitation. As we give God God's due praise and make our vows, may these days of gratitude show forth in lives of open-handed generosity and heartfelt joy and hope. Let our gratitude show in what we return to our God and Christ's ministry for the nurturing of abundant lives, the sustenance of Christ's ministry which form this place serves our neighbors near and far, remembering and honoring of the Source of all that we have; taking care of what we have received; enjoying the use of the resources at our command; sharing them generously with others for our sakes and for the sake of God's whole world.

Let us pray:

God whose giving knows no ending: Even in gratitude, we depend on the gift of your Spirit. Come to us now:

redeem forgetfulness with memory

fill silence with praise

heal fear with trust

replace fearful contracture of our hands and hearts with open-handed heartfelt gratitude. In all things,

make us imitators of you, in whose image we are created, that we might live in love, as Christ did now

and evermore. Amen.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

God who listens for our cries: Hear us now, as we lay before you our needs and the needs of the world.

Hear our prayers for creation ...

Hear our prayers for the nations and their leaders ...

Hear our prayers for the Church in the world and for our congregation ...

Hear our prayers for those who cannot help themselves, for the ill and for the lonely...

Hear our prayers for ourselves...

Hear our prayer Lord as we join in one voice using the prayer your Son taught us, saying...

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day, our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts
as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.