
Open Hands

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 8, Year A

I lost my keys in the grass. I had walked the whole yard, back and forth, covering every inch of ground. Nothing. Finally, out of frustration, I got my extra set, walked back out, and threw them into the grass — just to watch where they landed. I stood there a moment with that picture in my mind: keys in grass, how they sit, how the light catches them. Then I looked up and scanned the yard.

I found the original set immediately.

Nothing had changed in the yard. The keys had been there all along. What changed was the picture I was holding. And once I had the right picture, what was already present could finally reach me.

This is simply how we are made. The mind does not receive the world as it is. It receives the world through the pictures it already holds — the assumptions, the stories, the expectations we carry without even knowing we carry them. We don't see what is there. We see what we are looking for. And what doesn't fit the picture we are holding simply doesn't reach us, no matter how present it may be.

Most of the time, we don't even notice this is happening.

We want, most of us, to be fully known and fully loved. That longing runs very deep. But we are afraid — afraid that if anyone really knew us, they would not love what they saw. And so we show people a curated version of ourselves. We manage the presentation. We edit the interior life. We offer the self we think is acceptable and keep the rest out of sight.

Which means we prevent ourselves from receiving the very thing we most want. The love that comes back to us lands on the performance, not the person. And something in us knows this. And the longing goes unmet, even when everything appears, from the outside, to be going well.

The closed fist. It is not wicked. It is simply the self doing what it learned to do — grasping, protecting, securing. But a closed fist cannot receive. That is its limitation, not its intent.

Paul writes to the Romans: present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life. Not as those who are trying to get there. Not as those who hope, someday, to arrive. As those who have already been brought. The new life is not waiting for you on the other side of sufficient effort. It has already been given. Already accomplished. Already real, whether you have felt it or not.

The work Paul is asking of us is not the work of earning. It is the work of receiving. Present yourselves — open, available — to what has already happened to you in baptism, in depths you did not choose and cannot fully see. The wages economy says: do enough and you will receive what you have earned. But Paul says the gift of God is not wages. It is life. And life cannot be earned. It can only be received.

And then Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, after all the hard sayings — the division, the cost, the losing of the life you are clutching — lands here, in the simplest register imaginable. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me. Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones will not lose their reward. Four times in three verses, the word is welcome. Not achieve. Not earn. Not perform.

Welcome.

There is a difference between letting go and welcoming. Letting go is still a story about the self — what the self releases, what the self relinquishes. The self is still at the center, performing an act of surrender. And surrender, if we are not careful, becomes its own form of grasping — another achievement, another demonstration of spiritual progress.

But welcoming is oriented outward. The open palm does not turn inward to release. It turns outward to receive. It faces the world, the other, the one who is arriving. The fist stands against the world. The palm welcomes it.

And the open palm cannot be filled by anything we generate ourselves. It can only be filled by what is given. Which is why this posture is the beginning of everything — the beginning of prayer, the beginning of community, the beginning of the life Paul is describing. You cannot welcome from a closed fist. You cannot receive the gift if you are still operating in the wages economy, still trying to earn the love you were given before you knew to ask.

There is something the contemplative tradition has long observed — that the open hand, sustained over time, does something to the self. Gradually, almost without noticing, you stop experiencing yourself as the one managing the welcome. You become, in some way that is finally God's doing and not yours, the welcome itself. A kind of transparency. A life through which something moves that is not finally your own.

Fully known. And — this is the astonishing claim — the knowing is already love. There is no moment of evaluation between the seeing and the accepting. The sun was rising before you got to the window.

This is what we are here to practice together. Not just to manage a religious institution. Not just to maintain a tradition, as worthy as that is. But to learn, slowly and together, to live with open hands — so that we can walk back out these doors and be, each one of us, present to whoever arrives. The neighbor. The stranger. The person we almost didn't notice because our hands were already full.

The spiritual path, as best I can describe it, is to discern the presence of God — which was always already here, waiting to be seen with the right picture. To consent to an alignment with it — which is the slow work of opening the fist, Sunday after Sunday, year after year. And to witness to that alignment in the way we move through the world.

Not with grand gestures. With a cup of cold water. An open door. A moment of genuine attention given to one small, unimportant person who needed to be seen.

The gift has already been given. The life is already yours. The keys are in the grass.

Open your hands.

Amen.