



Sermons from
First Presbyterian Church

“With Arms Wide Open”

The Rev. Evans L McGowan

October 7th, 2012

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 15: 7-11

Hebrews 13: 1-3

Let us pray. *Gracious God, we bow before you now as one body in Christ. We seek your wisdom and your grace in this text today. May your word illumine our minds and move our hearts, and may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be transformative in the ways of Your Kingdom, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

It's October, which means a number of things. Fall clothing should definitely be out, and summer clothing put away or at least on it's way – still difficult for my Texan blood. Michigan Football is taking up more time than we may like to admit. And its Stewardship season at First Pres.

These next few weeks we will be looking at our church wide theme for this year, taking a phrase at a time to see how it feels and what it means for our lives as followers of the Christ. By now it should be somewhat familiar to you:

God opens our hearts

We open our arms

To grow, to love, to serve.

Last week we heard about God opening our hearts. If we are going to let God open our hearts, we must let go of any fears we might have. Our arms are an extension of our hearts, responding to God's action with action of our own. Yet if we are to open our arms, we also must let go of whatever we are holding onto.

Let us stick with that image for a minute, of arms wide open. When have you seen someone with their arms wide open? Perhaps it was recently during the Olympics, when an athlete won an event. Maybe it was in a movie or on TV, as if to say, Gladiator-style, Are you not entertained? Maybe it's a loved one, welcoming you into a warm embrace. Or maybe we think of Jesus on the cross, his arms wide open to the world, even amidst pain and suffering.

As a child, I remember visiting my grandparents in Monroe, Louisiana. After an eight hour road trip from Texas, we would arrive at my grandparents' house and sleepily come into their living room. My grandfather, Daddy Roy, would be there, open up his long, wide arms and I would run into them, being lifted up and thrown high into the air. He'd then sit me on his knee as if I were on a horse, grabbing my hands as the reins and saying, "this is the way the ladies rides, do *tah-dah tah-dah tah-dah*. This is the way the gentleman rides *too-doo too-doo too-doo*... Then the farmer and finally the cowboy... And it all began with those open arms. As Journey sings in their song, Open Arms, "So here I am with open arms, hoping you'll see what your love means to me." I certainly saw and remember my grandfather's open arms and his love for me.

As someone who loves movies, I also think of the Shawshank Redemption, when Andy Dufrane, after many years in jail for a crime he didn't commit, escapes prison by crawling through sewers five football fields in length. He emerges in a rain storm, trudges through the water and rips off his shirt, standing there and holding his arms up and open to the heavens, just laughing.

We have this great picture of my wife Emily all bundled up in winter gear, her beaming face pink and peaking out from her hood, standing on top of a volcano as the sun rises over the early morning clouds, and her arms are held wide open, as if trying to embrace it all.

What are the moments in your lives when you've opened up your arms? What did you feel? To what or whom were you opening your arms?

There is a song by the band Creed that was written right after the lead singer's son was born. It's called *With Arms Wide Open*, and like the prodigal father who welcomes his long lost son, he welcomes his newborn son into the world. He sings,

*With arms wide open
Now everything has changed
I'll show you love
I'll show you everything*

*If I had just one wish
Only one demand
I hope he's not like me
I hope he understands
That he can take this life
And hold it by the hand
And he can greet the world
With arms wide open...*

With arms wide open. It's a loving and yet very vulnerable state. How do we get there, to the point where we can greet the world with arms wide open?

Returning to our Hebrew Scripture reading this morning, it is God who moves us from being hard hearted to opening our fists. God opens our hearts, opens our *cor* – Latin for heart. You can hear it in the Spanish word for heart: *corazón*. Before we open arms, we must release our clenched fists, letting go of whatever we are holding onto. As my grandmother is fond of saying, “Let go and let God.”

This passage is also about Sabbath; about freeing one's time for God. God has released us from Egypt, from the shame of our past, from the bondage of slavery... What has God released you from in your life? How might we release others? What is holding us back from being set to grow, love and serve one another?

As the writer of Hebrews urges us, we are to open our arms and “let mutual love continue.”

When our heads are down and our hands are clasped, when we focus only on what we can see, then we fail to sense God's serendipitous spirit sparking connections in our midst. Thankfully, God opens our hearts and frees our bonds, so that we raise our hands to the Holy One and open our arms to each other.

How might we be led to open our arms to others?

Have we reached out to meet and greet someone new today?

Have we opened ourselves to others, committing to pray for them this week?

What would it mean to let go and let God, as my grandmother loves to say?

Friends, we all have something to give. We all have something to receive. Yet we only have so many arms. What can you let go of today that will set you free to open up and receive what God wants to give you? Can you see it? Can you feel it?

To God be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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