

Saints Alive: Living Generously. Shaped for Generous Living
Theme: Living with open hands

This sermon was preached by Pastor Heather Wigdahl on Sunday, October 9, 2011 at Trinity Lutheran Church.

Deuteronomy 15:7-11

The book of Deuteronomy reads as a series of speeches given by Moses. As a part of the covenant between God and God's people, social justice becomes a necessary part of faithfulness to God. Concern is stressed for the poor and the underprivileged, including slaves, women and foreigners. As we gather here today, God continues to call us and shape us for generous living. A reading from Deuteronomy, chapter 15:

⁷If 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. ⁸You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ⁹Be 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. ¹⁰Give 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. ¹¹Since 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." **Word of God, Word of Life.** Thanks be to God!

Grace and peace to you all, in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

"It is rare indeed that people give. Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be. One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself — that is to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving." — James Balwin,

This morning I want to talk about generosity. And I'd like us to think about generosity as a kind of "spaciousness" in our lives. Where we are willing to risk growing and changing; where we are willing to let God get a hold of us.

Generosity is the foundation of a moral and ethical life, as it is an opening into the experience of **joy** we all seek. When we cultivate a generosity of spirit, we regard one another with more kindness, patience, truthfulness, compassion. When we cultivate a generosity of spirit, our minds and hearts tend to open up, to the presence and grace of God with us.

Today we begin a new sermon series: "Saints Alive: Living Generously." Each week, we will consider another aspect of what makes our lives generous—spacious—in the experiences of God and of one another.

Who has shaped you, in your life, to live generously? Who has taught you that kind of *spaciousness* that makes room for the fullness of God in our lives? Or in the words of Old Testament law, in our reading today, who has taught you to “open your hand” to those in need, to open your hand to those whom you can serve?

I have been *captivated*, as a preacher, with the compelling lesson Mr. monkey can teach us. As a distant evolutionary cousin, he stills serves as a pretty apt mirror, I think.

Farmers in Southeast Asia know that once a monkey gets hold of something they want—be it a piece of fruit, or something shiny—they won’t let go. No matter what.

A hollowed out coconut, with a hole just big enough for their hand to slide in, will keep a monkey trapped, indefinitely. Once he grabs hold of the treasure inside, he won’t let go. If you come upon him in the jungle, he’d be sitting there with a forlorn look in his eyes, and one hand caught in the coconut. Wanting desperately to be free, and grasping his prize even tighter.

Most of us know better, than to get “stuck” in such a way. But often the metaphor applies: in our lives, our pursuits, our relationships, our successes; our failures and brokenness, too. *Sometimes* we behave more like a monkey than we want to admit.

We close our hands around our stuff, our accomplishments. We can clench our fists, around bitterness, anger, disappointment. **But tight-fisted living** has never been God’s dream for us. As spoken in the words of Deuteronomy, those OT laws guiding faithful living.

Generosity is not a fist, obviously. When we cling to anything for *false* security, we end up getting stuck in a place we don’t want to be. **Generosity is not a fist...**but I’ve been thinking, that it is also not a hand that just pushes everything away. **Aversion** is NOT generosity, either.

When it comes to material wealth, for example, the answer for *everyone* cannot be to just sell everything and give it all away. The *issue* is how we relate to stuff. And really, *grasping* or *pushing* has a similar affect: they make us less flexible, less responsive, more stuck.

We can’t just say, oh, I don’t want to deal with money; or “I don’t care about money.” Being flakey or naïve doesn’t make us generous. It just makes irresponsible.

True generosity is more like an open hand. Balanced. Not the extreme of a tight fist, grasping; or the indifference or apathy of a hand pushing everything away. An open hand is *neither* greedy nor self-neglecting; *neither* too cautious *nor* irresponsible.

An open hand is thankful, and recognizes that everything that’s most important to us, has come as a gift, not through our personal efforts. But I think we need one another to constantly remind us of that. Because together, we give and serve, and learn generosity from one another. Together, we discover that *spaciousness* in us, of God present with us.

So, as you go on your way, this week, I want you to do a couple of things: 1) I want you to *think about someone who has shaped **you** for generous living*. Thank them, if you can. And then 2) *think about how you are practicing open-handed living*, and teaching *others* to live generously, too.

In the words of Henri Nouwen, “Every time we take a step in the direction of generosity, we know we are moving from fear to love.” And that is the biggest and most spacious way to live. Blessings on the journey. Amen.