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First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

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Series: “Hands Free, Hearts Open, God First”

Message: “Space to Fill”

Scripture: I Kings 19:9-15, John 2:1-11

We are beginning a new series this week: “Hands Free, Hearts Open, God First” that will help us to continue to think about what it looks like to keep God first in our lives and to create some strategies for us to do so.

If we are going to keep God first, we need to have our hands free and our hearts open.

So as we start, let me ask you, how are your hands today? Are they full or empty? Somewhere in between?

How is your heart? Is it open or closed?

How is your relationship with God? Is it close and full of blessing? Is it distant and full of doubt? Is it a little routine and apathetic?

Chances are that if your hands are full in life, your heart may be closed, and if this is true, it is often difficult to find space in our lives for God and others, especially when it is most needed. Sure, you can schedule a get together three weeks out. But what about those moments when the need is now? Are you open to God’s nudging? Is there room in your life to do something about it? Are you free to drop everything and do what is most important in that moment?

The thing is, we live in a world where we have our hands full most of the time. It has become the new normal to juggle our family schedules, our work commitments, time with friends, service to the church and community, daily life choices, the list goes on…

Even those who are officially retired say they are busier than ever, watching grandchildren, going to appointments, caring for friends, traveling, serving.

And young people are reporting higher levels of stress and anxiety with school work, sports, arts, jobs, preparations for the future.

Our hands are full metaphorically. And they are also full literally with all the stuff we have, with these smart phones that we carry around 24/7 that continually distract us from being fully in the moment. There are groups of friends who have taken to putting their phones face down on the table when they go out for dinner or coffee. Whoever reaches for their phone first has to pay the bill or something like that.

It’s harder than it sounds. We are so easily distracted from what is the most urgent. But what is urgent isn’t always what is most important. And when the urgent begins to take over, we rarely get back to what is most important. The moment in that relationship, the opportunity has passed and we have missed it.

Our distraction has become a habit and our worry has become a habit. What if someone needs me? I have to check, to respond.

We’re so busy, so worried, often so stressed out—so full that the days fly by. We want to have open hearts to do more, to be there for everyone, to experience God more fully, life and relationships more deeply, but we’re not sure how to make that happen.

So it becomes about space—finding space, making space in our lives. When our hands and our lives and our minds are too full, our hearts become closed. We can’t do any more, take any more so we just close ourselves off. But when we make space in our lives—free up our hands, free our mind from the worry and get a handle on the urgent, we find slowly that our hearts are opened again to God and others.

It reminds me of the old story describing how to catch a monkey. You don’t have to put the monkey in the cage, just the fruit. The slats in the cage are just wide enough that the monkeys hand can fit through when it is open. But when the hand is full, clutching the fruit, it will not fit back through. The money can be free if he just drops that fruit. But he never does. He will not let it go even though it means his freedom. If he lets go, he will be free.

What are we holding on to, making a priority in our lives that is keeping our hands full, and therefore our hearts closed? What do you need to let go of today for your heart to be open, for God to be first?

It will be different for each of us. Perhaps it is an activity or two, perhaps it is worry, perhaps it is your tendency to always say yes, to be the super-responsible one, to have everything perfect. Perhaps it is giving up guilt, regret, insecurity, anger, or being judgmental.

One way to think about what we need to let go of is to ask, when I look back on my life, what will I regret holding onto so tightly, spending so much energy on?

It usually has to do with our relationships. We regret those things that distracted us, that closed us off to those we love the most. And when we are closed to others, to closes us to God. And when we are closed to God, we are increasingly closed to others.

What do you need to let go of today so that your hands are free, your heart open?

Our scripture gives us the example of Elijah. He was holding on tightly to his fear. He was afraid of Jezebel, of losing his life. He probably should have thought of that before he had a showdown with her priests of Baal. He and God won a stunning victory but instead of rejoicing and standing up to Jezebel, he realized he was a wanted man and let fear overcome him.

And that fear was powerful. It closed his heart and separated him from trusting God. He started running. He ran until he fell down in the desert in exhaustion. An angel tended to him and he got up and ran some more.

He had witnessed, in fact helped mediate God’s victory. And yet we see that fear has filled his hands, and closed his heart to God. All he can do is run.

The change happens when he stops running. He stops at Mt. Horeb. And there on the side of the mountain in a cave he pours out his soul to God. He admits his fear. He admits that he feels all alone. He empties himself. He creates space for God.

And in that space, he experiences a powerful moment with God. That space that he has freed becomes holy space.

There is a powerful, terrible wind that comes and splits the mountain and shatters rocks. And then there is an earthquake, and then fire.

But God’s power is even beyond this. Then there is a soft murmuring sound, a gentle whisper. God is most powerfully present in that quiet empty space.

This space, this quiet moment is what gives Elijah the ability to hear God’s word to him, to let go of his fear, and to open his heart to God and God’s people, to go back and continue his ministry.

When we do the same, when we let go, when we open our hearts, when we sit in the space of peace, even in the powerful storm that is God, we begin to realize what is truly important vs. what seems urgent in the moment. It helps us to find new energy, new passion, new ways of seeing and being that are not so exhausting but lead to peace and joy. Miracles happen and we experience God in our midst.

Miracles something like the miracle at the wedding in Cana. They were short on wine, much like we are often short on time, energy, money, grace. And often we are embarrassed and we just keep trying harder to stretch things, to make it work, to make it last. We water things down. We pretend we don’t need it. We use lots of food coloring in water hoping that no one will notice.

But Mary might say to us, “Stop trying so hard. Stop trying to do it all yourself.” Open up your hands and hearts, take the water jars of your life and bring them to Jesus.

And when we do, something profound happens. We have more than enough. We have abundance. There is nothing cheap about it. It is life at its best, of the highest quality.

It is the kind of quality and abundance that makes us sit in rapt silence, enjoying life, pondering, appreciating, trusting the mystery of God and live and love.

And then being attuned, open to God and to the hearts of those around us, we are open for God’s blessings to flow through us.

Our challenge this week is to let go of the distractions, the untruths, the urgent so that we can be fully present to God and to those around us, giving our hearts and our time to what is truly important.