Dr. Suzanne Allen

First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

January 24, 2016

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

Message: “Who Is In Control?”

Scripture: Proverbs 3:1-6, Luke 4:14-21

Last week we began our winter series, “Hands Free, Hearts Open, God First” by asking what it is in life that we need to let go of so that our hearts are open and God can be first in our lives.

Even if we identified what that was, even if we practiced this week, even if we made a good start on letting go, we know from experience that it’s not as easy as it sounds or might seem from the outside looking in.

So we want to keep the question in front of us and continue to think about what it looks like and how we can free our hands, open our hearts and keep God first in our lives.

So let’s begin by thinking about why our hands get full—too full. Often this happens because we are good at picking things up. It’s a good thing. We’re interested in the world around us. We’re open to new people and opportunities. We’re filled with love and care for the people and the world around us. We get an A in picking things up, in saying yes to them, in holding onto them, in caring passionately about them.

The problem is that we don’t do nearly as well with the putting things down part. Once it’s in our hands, we don’t want to put it back down, to let go, at least for a moment or a season.

And so we pick things up, we hold on tightly, and we do this over and over until our hands are too full and we begin to shut down. But to put anything down feels like it might be irresponsible, unloving, missing out.

Why do we have such a hard time putting things down, letting go? There are lots of reasons, it feels like it might be irresponsible, or unloving, or that we might miss out on something. But really, for the most part, it boils down to one little world: control.

Whether it’s in a relationship or our workplace or in other organizations, when our hands are full, we feel like we have some control. And we get used to that control. We like it…at least for a while. It makes us feel valuable as we share our gifts and our time. But the other side of that control is that it convinces us that it’s all on us, that everything will fall apart without us.

And so rather that living in a healthy rhythm of picking up and putting down, we pick up and rarely set down, often tightening our grip when things seem to be getting out of control.

But as we continue to do this, we begin to close our hearts to the blessings of being with , or near others, the blessings of watching others try and grow and gain skills, of watching God unfold a plan that is much bigger and far more breathtaking that we could have envisioned.

Rachel May Stafford describes the first moment she realized this. Maybe you can identify with her story, changing a few details to fit your work life or family life, the places you like to be in control. It happened on a day when she was so sick she had no control even of whether she was awake or asleep.

She writes, “The truth is, had I not been sick, I would have tried to control the situation. Because that is what I did. In my haste to get things done quickly with the least amount of mess…in my effort to avoid conflict and achieve the best results…in my quest to protect my children from harm and failure…in my pursuit to appear as if my children and I had it all together, I attempted to control everything, including people, events, time, and situations.”

While she couldn’t do anything, her kids stepped up and did more than she would have ever let them do or asked them to do. And they did it much better than she would have expected.

She realized, “My need for control was holding us all back from fulfilling life experiences, meaningful connection, and transformational growth.”

How often is this true in our homes, in our internal life, in our work life? Stafford made a vow then and there that she would begin to loosen her grip, to give up having to control everything and everyone, and begin to welcome growth, and then help of God and others into her life.

Sometimes having our hands free and our hearts open doesn’t mean that we let everything go completely. What it does mean is that we change our relationship with it. We loosen our grip. We relinquish control. We relax and enjoy and nurture rather than boss and order and feel like we have to do everything so that it will all be perfect.

The only way to do this is to trust—to trust others and God.

Think of those situations when you tighten your grip, work to hold on to control. Your firsts are clenched, your jaw is clenched, and your heart is clenched. There isn’t a foundation of trust.

But when you loosen your grip, when you realize that you’re in it together, when you realize that the journey together is more important than the destination, you begin to share the control—to trust others. You begin to turn ultimate control over to God—to trust God with all of your heart.

Our hearts open when we move from control to trust. This is what our scripture from Proverbs is all about: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. Acknowledge him in all your ways and he will direct your path.”

This is faith—to let go of the need to have everything go our way, to be perfect. Faith is loosening your grip on life and turning the control over to God, trusting that God will lead you along a path of blessing and abundant life.

There is an amazing freedom in living this way, in trusting God and letting your life and other’s lives unfold according to God’s plan.

It’s freeing, but it’s also confronting.

The people of Israel had a plan. They would wait faithfully for the Messiah. They would be God’s elect, following the law perfectly. They would teach their children to do the same.

They held on to that plan, to the law so tightly that they couldn’t see that the messiah had come and was standing right in front of them. They couldn’t see that God was acting, fulfilling the law and the promise right before their eyes, here and now. Their hands were full and their hearts were closed.

Jesus read the scripture in worship that day in his hometown of Nazareth. He read the words from the prophet Isaiah and then said, “This is true in me today.” Let’s get moving. Let’s share this good news with the poor, the blind, the oppressed.

Their clenched fists shook with rage. How dare he? They drove him out of town with a violent anger.

Are we willing to give up our control, our ways, our plans, our need to be right, our need to please, our need to be perfect according to our plan? Are we willing to loosen our grip and trust God, to let God have the control, to let God do a new thing in our hearts, in our midst, to help us grow?

It’s about surrender. Trust and surrender go together. If we trust God with all of our heart, then we must be willing to surrender control, to let go of our way and embrace God’s way.

We must surrender our past—our mistakes and our successes. Too often the past controls and defines us. When we trust God, each day is a new day with the permission to try and fail and try again—with permission to grow.

We must surrender our desire to make today perfect. Our faith tells us that we are not perfect. If we were, we wouldn’t need a savior. The good news is that no one is perfect, and no one can be perfect. The only one who was perfect was Jesus, and they furiously drove him out of town and tried to throw him over the cliff. We cannot be perfect. But what we can do is perfectly depend on—trust in God’s grace and love in Jesus Christ each day.

We must surrender our desire to map out the future, to protect ourselves and others from all the what-ifs that we are afraid of, to settle for less so that we can fell more in control. We open our hearts in faith to God and others trusting that God will help us through the unknowns and the doubts and the hard times, that God will provide a way. We take the next step of faith for today, trusting that even when we cannot see, God can and that God’s vision for our future is even more beautiful that we have for ourselves.

Today, I invite you to surrender control to God, to trust him with all your heart, for he will direct your paths.