

Proper 12, Pentecost 9, Year A (RCL)
July 30, 2023
New Song Church
Jane Stewart

1 Kings 3:5-12
Psalm 119:129-136
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Opening Ourselves to God

As you entered worship today, you were given two things 1) a bulletin and 2) a coin. I'm guessing you've got questions about what's with the coin, and I'm about to tell you if you're willing to play along. I have a number of coins up here that I want to show you. Each one represents something you may or may not yet know about me.

- I was born in Arkansas and lived there, in three different towns, through most of my elementary school years.
- My best friend in Arkansas was Doug Greth. In a weird coincidence, we had the exact same birthday.
- My dad was a Presbyterian minister.
- My mother taught music at the elementary school level.
- I fought constantly with my younger sister, Marion throughout childhood and adolescent years. By some miracle, we are now quite close.
- Moving to Dallas in the 5th grade was traumatic for me for a number of reasons, but at least I got my own bedroom out of the deal and no longer had to share one with my sister.
- In high school, thanks to Title IX, I was able to play competitive volleyball, basketball, and of all things, bowling.
- My father died of a massive heart attack just before my junior year in

high school.

- I went to Rhodes College in Memphis, TN, from which both of my parents had also graduated.
- This one might surprise you – I was in a sorority. Kappa Delta.
- I've lived in Arkansas, Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, Minnesota (briefly-that's a whole other story), South Dakota, and Iowa.
- I was married to a man for 13 very long years.
- I have two children – Mikhal and James, and three grandchildren, Augustine William, Clara Julian, and Genevieve Helena – all named after saints.
- I've lived in Iowa City for almost 30 years – until Iowa City, the longest I'd lived anywhere was the 7 years I lived in Anamosa, IA.
- I've been clergy in Presbyterian, Lutheran, and now Episcopal congregations – it took me a while to figure out where I really fit denominationally, but New Song was incredibly helpful in that process.
- Since 1999, I've been happily married to my soulmate Linda who knows me better than I know myself and who still loves me in spite of, or perhaps because of, my quirkiness.
- I'm learning Spanish though the Duolingo app on my phone.
- I enjoy classical music.
- I am an avid Iowa Women's Basketball fan.
- I love working jigsaw puzzles, and I do Wordle and the NYT Spelling Bee every day.
- I am competitive when playing any sort of game – not something that I'm proud of but have learned to accept.

That's already probably more than you necessarily wanted to know about me, but I still have one coin left. Don't worry though, because all I'm telling you about this one is that it stands for all the things about myself that I will not be telling you because – well, I don't want you to know those things.

The coin that you are holding represents the things you want to keep hidden from other people. We all have them – those things that we clutch tightly and don't intend to share. We can even be that way with God when we pray, trying to hide things we are ashamed of or afraid God won't like about us – as if God isn't already onto us – but still. . . . As you hold your coin, take a moment to think about something that you would just as soon hide from God, if you could, and let your coin represent that thing. . . .

We're going to do something today that we haven't done since before the pandemic and pass the offering plates later in the service. In addition to your regular offering, if you are ready to trust God and to share what you are hiding, put your coin in the plate and give it over to God. If you aren't ready, hang onto it. Put it in your pocket. Today may not be the right time for you, and that's OK. The coins that are collected will be added to our regular offering, as gifts of ourselves that we bring to God in prayer.

In her book, *Pray as You Can*, Jean Gill says that, "Prayer is like a window. It is our way of opening our self to God. It is the response to our deep desire to allow the Spirit of God to blow through our souls, to feel the movement of God within our Self, to hear the whisper or the roar or the music of God's voice; to look and see the image of God imprinted within our Self; to allow God's hand to reach deep within our hearts to touch and mold us; to breathe

deeply of God's Spirit; to be filled with God to the height and depth and breadth of our being."ⁱ

Isn't that a wonderful definition of prayer? I love it! And I'd love for all of my prayer to be like that too! But it's not. Not always – OK, maybe not even most of the time, if I'm honest. Sometimes prayer is more like eating at a fast food restaurant. It is served up quickly using a precise formula, lacks both variety and nutritional value, and isn't always terribly satisfying. But it's fast and convenient, and it's better than nothing.

I suspect all of us have times of highs and lows in our lives of prayer – we may spend most of our time in the middle, but there are still those moments of great spiritual joy and others of spiritual despair. Ironically, it is when we need most to feel God's nearness that we tend to push God away.

When everything is clicking, we feel good about ourselves – we feel close to God – we delight in God's grace and the abundance of God's blessings. Like happy moments when we are surrounded by the people we love best in all the world; like times we spend alone with God, perhaps in a favorite quiet spot in our home or on a lovely wooded trail, or as a hike and our prayer become indistinguishable because our hearts are so filled with praise and thanksgiving.

At other times, we crash spiritually – doubting ourselves – doubting God – wondering why God, if there is a God, seems to have abandoned us, leaving us feeling helpless and grasping for any sign of hope amidst the overwhelming forces of despair. Times of grief, times of abandonment, time

of anger at God, and times of hopelessness can thrust us into depths of self-pity and anguish that feel far beyond our coping capabilities.

In those low times it's often hard to accept Paul's words that, "All things work together for good." It is only after some time and distance from the tough times that we eventually begin to be able to see them in a new light with a different perspective.

No wonder we don't always know how to pray as we ought! In the moment of despair or time of suffering, our hearts are so filled with confusion, doubt, or fear that we don't have the perspective we need to do any more than groan before God!

That is when, thank goodness, the Spirit intercedes for us "with sighs too deep for words." Our sighs, our groans, become an invitation – an opening of ourselves to God – they become prayer. In his little book on prayer entitled, *With Open Hands*, Henri Nouwen says, "Praying is no easy matter. It demands a relationship in which you allow the other to enter into the very center of your person, allow God to speak there, allow God to touch the sensitive core of your being, and allow God to see so much that you would rather leave in darkness. . . ."ii Opening oneself to God is like giving up that last coin in our clenched fist. That coin might be our feelings of inadequacy, our doubts, our deepest needs, the thoughts and feelings that frighten us, our addictions, our secrets – all the things we try desperately to hide from other people, from God, and sometimes, even from ourselves.

That last coin is not one we share readily – it makes us feel too exposed, too

vulnerable, as though giving up that coin would be to give up our very selfhood. But God says to us “loosen your grasp on that tightly held coin – for as long as you hold it so tightly, you don’t have any room in your hand for me. You can trust me with it – I won’t betray you. And no matter what it is that you clutch so tightly, I will still love you – all of you – even the parts of you that you hide so well.”

What is it that is written on the coin you clench in your fist? Is it anger? Resentment? Jealousy? Shame? Is it a self that is hidden away for fear of being rejected if someone were to really know what it is we keep hidden beneath so many layers of protective outerwear? Perhaps it isn’t any one big coin but rather a lot of small ones – bitterness at someone who didn’t acknowledge or appreciate our gift, disappointment in a friend or family member, jealousy of someone whose young children are better behaved or whose grown children call more often than ours do, anger at someone who we feel has betrayed our trust.

God invites us to name the coin and to open our hand. God invites us to be freed from the hurts and fears that shackle our hearts – to find acceptance and unconditional love.

Paul asks, “Who can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” Will the inability to pray as we think we should? Will the coins we hold tightly in our clenched fists?

No. Nothing – absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in

Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing in all creation – not even our inability to pray, our feelings of inadequacy, or our sin. After all, Paul notes, God did not withhold even the Son, but gave him up for all of us. Will God not, with Jesus, also give us everything else?

When the time seems right, may each of us be freed to open our hands and our hearts – to release those coins we've held so tightly. Nouwen says, "Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of God who wants to enter that space where you live, or to let God see what you are clinging to so anxiously. Don't be afraid to show the clammy coin which will buy so little anyway. Don't be afraid to offer your hate, bitterness, disappointment to God who is revealed to us as love."ⁱⁱⁱ

Don't be afraid, for nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing.

Amen.

ⁱ Jean Gill, *Pray As You Can* 1989, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, IN p. 17

ⁱⁱ *With Open Hands*, by Henri J. M. Nouwen, p. 12

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 16