

Open Up Your Life
The Wide Open Life – Week 3

We are talking about the wide open life, the life we are created to live. This is our January focus.

A text is guiding us, 2 Corinthians 6:11-13. Let's read it together:

I can't tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. 12 We didn't fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren't small, but you're living them in a small way. 13 I'm speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!

Our first week on this focus we looked at how we feel a desire within for more—more life. This desire comes from God who has created the church to be the opening act for the kingdom of God. Together we are to work to bring about the more God intends.

Last week, we recognized that the wide open life is a life of generosity. We focused on generosity in relationships. A wide open life is one where we offer grace, forgiveness, love, compassion to others.

This can be a real challenge. We are all broken people. We all come from our own insecurities. My own insecurities, my own fears of being passed over, or of not being good enough, can cause me to ascribe to others behavior that has nothing to do with them. Ever do that?

Ever take something personal that wasn't? Ever feel snubbed when that wasn't the intention? Our own insecurities can cause us to jump to all kinds of conclusions many that aren't based in truth.

The wide open life is a generous life and generosity in relationships is foundational for wide open living.

Today we turn to talk more about how we open up our lives. How do just regular people, not super Christians, live more fully? How do we find the wide open spaces that invite us forward?

Do this with me. Look at your hands.

When babies are born they come into the world with these tiny hands that are closed. But as soon as you put your finger out trying to open those little hands, the baby will grab tightly on.

Toddlers hold hands as they cross the street with parents. In preschool we pair them with a buddy so as they go to snack or line up, they have a partner.

As we grow, we hold tight privately to our Mom or Dad's hand, but publicly, we don't. We eventually hold the hand of a boyfriend or girlfriend--it signals we are with someone.

In college, in work we hold onto the rungs of the ladder as we climb up. Or maybe we hold onto a hand that becomes our husband or wife. Or maybe it is we now hold a child's hand or a spatula as we cook dinner for our family.

In retirement, we hold onto golf clubs or garden tools or onto the wheel of a motor home as we travel and see the world.

As we age, we may hold onto a cane or a walker—it gives us strength and stability.

But the thing is....sometimes our holding on is much more than holding on. It can become clutching.

I know a little about clutching, about grabbing, about not letting go.

Probably the hardest part of coming here was moving from our home. We bought when the market wasn't too bad in a community I never thought we could afford. What I liked about the area was all the wide open space. It was beautiful, green, lots of trees, lots of places to walk and think.

I especially loved the jacaranda trees in the neighborhood. They bloom in the late spring and filled the neighborhood where I lived with purple blossoms. We lived on a hill and when we'd come down the hill the purple that greeted us was amazing.

The house was great but small and so we did two additions—a kitchen and dining room and a master bed and bath. Neither was huge but both were beautiful and added to our living.

What was huge was I had a huge garden with tons of roses and cut flowers and a big veggie garden and lots of space. It was also a great house for parties and we had lots of them having church folks and family over often.

When we sold the house, I didn't even want to meet the people who bought it, it just hurt too much. I kept a key to the house on my key chain until a couple weeks' ago.

I couldn't let go. Truth be told, I didn't want to let go.

What do you clutch? What do you hold tightly, fearful of letting it go?

Some of us clutch onto our spouse, we are jealous of anything that takes their attention off of us.

Some of us clutch onto our kids, we undermine their growing independence.

Some of us clutch onto our jobs, they give us identity as they define us as competent and valued.

Some of us clutch onto our church, we resist any change.

Some of us clutch onto our money, it gives us security.

Clutching comes naturally to us, it seems that it is human nature.

But in the wide open life, God calls us to let go.

Homer clip

That is pretty funny. It is obvious he has to let go in order to be freed, but it is the last thing he wants to do. Let go?

What I want to talk about today is that the wide open life is a growing life. Clutching stops us from living the wide open life.

Let's look at our next text: Luke 10:1-10 (the Message)

1 Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. **2** There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. **3** He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way - he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. **4** So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by. **5** When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home." **6** Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. **7** Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, "What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?" **8** Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor - and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages." **9** Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! **10** For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost."

Zacchaeus was a clutcher.

As a tax collector he was the lowest of the lows. He was a Jew who collected money on behalf of Rome from other Jews. How it worked was Zacchaeus would not only collect what Rome required but anything above that was his to keep – this was how he earned his money. Jesus lived during a time of terrible taxation and people like Zacchaeus were hated.

Jesus challenged him to stop clutching. And his response? He says, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor - and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages." In other words, he lets go of what had worked—his taking advantage of people and turns to trust God instead. And Jesus' response?

Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! **10** For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost."

Salvation has come. Salvation is not only about going to heaven when you die, but as we have talked about in previous weeks, salvation has as its root meaning in Hebrew, "to be spacious, to be broad" The wide open life is what has come to Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus has understood where his focus should be—not on money, on stuff but on a life put in order because God became primary.

Last week we looked at our revised church structure. I shared how we are organized around four main areas, we looked at two last week, Attracting or Inviting and Welcoming. We spoke of how out of a generous life we both invite and welcome people into our shared life here at the church.

Here is the third area of focus: growth/nurture.

If we are going to be people who live a wide open life we can't wait for someone to wave a magic wand over us and poof! we are living it. Instead we commit to the path, we become about things that help us grow in that direction.

I want to invite you to commit to the path of growth. I am very excited that we will be having Lenten home study groups starting in late February. Today is the first day to sign up for groups. We have seven groups to choose from.

I know you are busy, but for you to grow and for our church to move where it is being called we all need to commit to our spiritual journey. This is a journey we take

together, that is why small groups are so powerful. Will you take that step? Will you move toward the wide open life through growing in faith so that you learn how to let go and how to put your focus on God?

Think about that as we look at our next text: Matthew 6:19-24 (The Message)

19 "Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or - worse! - stolen by burglars. 20 Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars. 21 It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being. 22 "Your eyes are windows into your body. If you open your eyes wide in wonder and belief, your body fills up with light. 23 If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust, your body is a dank cellar. If you pull the blinds on your windows, what a dark life you will have! 24 "You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and Money both.

The text last week as we talked about the generous life was about a woman who takes her outrageous expensive perfume and pours it over Jesus. This led us to think about where we are generous in our lives and where we hoard. Last week's "take home" was to think about where you are generous in your relationships already and with whom do you hoard—that is, you don't take their actions in the best possible way, you don't offer grace and mercy.

This text from Matthew focus on generosity and money. It stands in contrast to hoarding which is all about clutching. It is about a tight grip that won't let go.

Jesus teaches about this in the context of money because that is where a lot of hoarding and clutching goes on—another piece of human nature I think. His words speak to us about how we are blinded by money and things and settle for service to them instead of orienting our life to God.

Let me share something from my life...When I first came into ministry I had no idea how much money Jeff and I were to give to the church each month. I didn't grow up with any model of this so I was uncertain.

For a variety of reasons, I ended up going from Torrance to Pomona many times with Hope's choir director, Susan Weimer. During those long drives I got a real chance to get to know her and one of the things we spoke about was finances. Finances were a hard thing to talk about, but something about Susan let me know I was safe as we explored this together. She had no judgment on me, she just listened and shared from her life.

I grew up in a family where money was a huge issue. We lived in an affluent community (Westlake Village) but due to issues with my Dad's employment, we were constantly struggling to pay bills.

In fact, my Dad used to say, "kids when you come home today from school don't be surprised if all your stuff is on the curb and I have been taken to debtors prison." He was only kind of joking.

I was really scared about not having enough money and that which led me to hoard what money I had. I kept a book where I wrote down everything I spent or loaned out.

When school and training finished, and with Jeff and I both employed, my natural inclination was to continue to hoard what money we were making so I wouldn't feel so insecure. Maybe if I had enough I would start to relax, but I never did. I knew that there had to be more to this all and my conversations with Susan helped me start to see what that was.

She shared that she and Warren, her husband, gave 10% off their gross salary to God's work through the church. That just blew my mind. I remember sitting with her doing the math in my head for what that would be for Jeff and I. I remember talking to Jeff about this and the two of us just thinking, we could never do that.

After lots of conversations and struggles and years, Jeff and I grew into giving 10% our net income as a way to put our priorities into action. I share this cause I just want you to know of our process and our struggles.

Letting go, not clutching and hoarding is counter-cultural. It says that we believe that God is who God says he is. It says that even in our selfishness and desire to control, we are realizing that our lives are not for us to control. That we are realizing that letting go of control makes life richer and more than it can be when it is all up to us. This is very against the grain.

Monday I went to Disneyland. I spent the first four hours there reading "Christ the Lord Out of Egypt" which our church book club is reading. Then I ran into 2 of my favorite people from Hope UMC. They were asking me how things are going and as I spoke I realized that in the midst of all the change, everything in my life and in the church feels very much in God's hands.

As we look at troubles in our families, or stresses at work, it is human nature to exert control so we might manage things. We think it is all up to us, we think for life to be good we have to make it happen. But that doesn't work. We aren't in control, we have to let go of control and trust God—in good time and bad time, when you can see the way and when you can't. If the wide open life is a growing life it grows most when we let go and trust God.

Let's look at this week's take home:

1. Sign up for a small group. You can do this today and next week at fellowship time. We are also working for to have this on-line this week also. You will see a variety of times and locations. If you don't see a group that fits you, we can add a group. The materials we will use will be video based so you don't need experience teaching.
2. Begin to discern your financial pledge to the church for this year. There is a brochure in your 24/7 which outlines our budget. You will be sent a pledge card this week but you can also pledge on our website. Next Sunday at 5PM is our Town Hall meeting where we will update everyone and celebrate the church.

The wide open life is a generous life, so may you be gracious in your relationships.
The wide open life is a growing life, so may you commit to the path.
May you grow in your trust and confidence in God's presence and power which has
created you for more.

Let us pray.