

September 13, 2026 — Sermon

Scripture Reading: Exodus 14:19–31

Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:21–35

“Open Hands”

After my wife moved in, I finally started paying attention to what was actually in the parsonage. One day, I found an axe in the garage. I grew up in a city, so I was honestly a little surprised. I thought, “Why is there an axe at home? When am I ever going to use this?” So I just left it in the corner.

Then last week, my wife and I went to Menards for the first time. It was an eye-opening experience for us. There were so many interesting things to look at that we completely lost track of time. We ended up buying a fire pit and some firewood for the backyard. When we tried to make a fire, however, one piece of wood was too big. And suddenly I remembered: there is an axe in the garage. So I brought it out and tried to split the wood. It was my first time.

On television, people hit the wood once, and it splits perfectly in half. That did not happen to me. I kept trying. I watched some YouTube videos. Eventually, after almost an hour, I finally split one piece of wood. And the next day, my hands were very sore. Thankfully, I still have all ten toes. The bricks in my backyard were not quite as lucky.

Afterward, I thought about something. Yes, I worked hard to split that wood. But even that very small accomplishment depended on things I had not provided for myself. I did not buy that axe. I did not put it in the garage. It was already there before I knew I would need it. And I did not discover the best way to split wood by myself. Other people had already learned it and made videos so that someone like me could learn from them. Of course, I put in the effort. But my effort cannot explain the whole story.

And sometimes we encounter similar experiences in our lives. We often look at what we have and think, “I achieved this. I earned this. I did this.” But how much of our lives did we really create by ourselves?

When I first came to the United States to study, I sometimes heard people say something that impressed me. Some students who had grown up with many opportunities would say, “I’ve been very fortunate.” And while learning English, I

also came across the expression, "the less fortunate," to describe people who have had fewer economic opportunities. I found that expression interesting.

Of course, we cannot explain poverty, success, or hardship simply by saying that someone was lucky or unlucky. But the language reminds us of something important. A person is not necessarily poor because that person is lazy. A person is not necessarily successful because that person is smarter, better, or more hardworking than everyone else.

So many things we did not choose shape our lives. The family into which we were born. The education we received. The people who encouraged us. Our health. The country and time in which we were born. The opportunities that came our way.

I came from Korea to study in the United States. Of course, I studied. I worked hard. I prepared. But did I come here simply because I was better than people who did not have the same opportunity? No. I have known people more talented than I am who could not come because of finances, family circumstances, or many other reasons. So I think the more honest thing to say is: My effort is real, but my effort is not the whole story.

Today's reading from Exodus shows us something similar. The Israelites stand in a desperate place. Behind them is Pharaoh's army. In front of them is the sea.

They did not cross the sea because they left Egypt earlier. They did not cross because they walked faster. They did not cross because they carried lighter baggage. They crossed because God made a way where they could not make a way for themselves.

And Moses stands there with a staff in his hand. Before God called Moses, that staff was probably nothing remarkable. Moses had been tending sheep in the wilderness. It was the kind of ordinary tool a shepherd would carry every day. But when God called Moses, that ordinary staff began to take on a different role. When Moses performs wondrous signs, he lifts up his staff, pointing it toward the land, the sky, and the sea.

God tells Moses to lift up his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea. Moses obeys, and the sea parts. However, it was not Moses who parted the sea. The authority revealed through his staff came from God. Moses lifted up his hand in obedience, trusting the God who had called him.

They received a way they could never make for themselves. Sometimes grace becomes most visible precisely when our own ability reaches its limit. Suffering itself is not grace. Hardship itself is not a blessing. But in those moments when we realize that we cannot control everything, cannot solve everything, and cannot save

ourselves, we may see more clearly how much we have always depended on the grace of God.

And this is where faith takes us one step beyond saying, "I've been fortunate." To say, "I have been fortunate," can be a humble statement. It recognizes that my life is not entirely self-made. But people of faith ask some further questions.

Where did what I have come from? To whom does it ultimately belong? And where should it go?

And I think one simple expression captures that perspective beautifully. Since coming to Wisconsin, I have heard many people say: "I'm blessed." I like that expression. "I'm blessed" does not mean, "Everything is going well for me." And it certainly does not mean, "I have more than someone else, so God must love me more."

To say, "I'm blessed," can be a confession: What I have is a gift. It ultimately belongs to God. And it is not meant to end with me.

Now, let's take a look at Jesus' parable in Matthew 18. A servant owes his master ten thousand talents. It is an impossibly large debt.

One talent was roughly six thousand days' wages, or about twenty years' wages. So ten thousand talents would represent about two hundred thousand years' wages. If we simply imagine one day's wage as one hundred dollars, that would be about six billion dollars.

Jesus intentionally gives us a number far beyond what this servant could ever repay. He cannot work harder and solve the problem. He cannot save himself. He is completely dependent on mercy. And the master forgives the whole debt. If anyone should have walked out of that room saying, "I'm blessed!" it was this servant.

But then he meets another servant who owes him a much smaller amount. And what does he say? "Pay what you owe." He grabs him. He refuses mercy. He has him thrown into prison.

The problem is not that this servant never received grace. He received an unbelievable amount of grace. The problem is this: He forgot that he was a receiver. Grace came to him, but grace stopped with him.

He remembered exactly what another person owed him, but he forgot the debt that had just been forgiven. And sometimes we do the same. We easily forget the help we have received. But we remember our own effort. We forget the mercy shown to us. But we remember the wrong someone did to us. We forget how much room

other people made for us. But we become very careful about how much room we will make for someone else.

I titled today's message "Open Hands." If I believe everything I have is mine because I earned it, I will naturally hold it tightly. "This is mine." "I worked for this." "I deserve this." "You owe me."

But when I remember that I am first a receiver, something changes. My grip begins to loosen. I can forgive. I can share. I can serve. I can make room for someone who has had fewer opportunities than I have.

That is also true of grace in our lives. Our effort matters. Our choices matter. But our effort is never the whole story. Before we are achievers, we are receivers.

So perhaps saying, "I'm blessed," is not the end of our confession. Maybe it is the beginning of our responsibility. I am blessed. Then where will that blessing go?

What we have is a gift. It belongs to God. And God's grace is not meant to end with us. We are not only people who have achieved. We are first people who have received. And when we remember that, grace loosens our grip. Grace opens our hands.