

**“With Open Hands”**  
(Based on Philippians 2:1-6)

Rev. David Gregory

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Well, here we are, together in this place. I cannot begin to say how grateful I am that this moment has finally arrived. Since we last saw you—five short weeks ago— I have completed my interim ministry, Tripp has sold his practice and vacated our office space in Manhattan. We have given away furniture and household items, packed up what was left (still way too much). We braved the winter weather and entered the snowbelt of western New York to visit our kids and grandkids, onto Rochester to see my sister and to gather a few friends for coffee. Then back in Scarsdale, we watched in awe as both of our cars and all our belongings were carted away on trucks, while hoping that we would one day be reunited with them.

We put our pets in carry-on bags and boarded a plane at JFK, only to sit on the tarmac for ninety minutes before we could begin the six and half hour flight. We arrived, rented a car, drove to our new place, where Hazel awaited us with food and wine and a blow-up mattress, and for the next two weeks we looked out the window and asked ourselves, “What just happened?”

After a week our cars arrived, and then three days ago the rest of our belongings found their way to us, and due to that delay, we enjoyed a week of vacation—exploring, reading books, taking naps, seeing a movie or two (maybe a winery or two!), and now we are ready to go. And as Tripp sang for you in January, it’s a new dawn and a new day, and we’re feeling ... good!

I’ve already spoken with Irene, but I want to say this publicly: We all owe her a huge debt of gratitude for her dedication to the hard work of interim ministry. She freely admits that she pushed you pretty hard, and you have responded by asking yourselves some very tough questions about this window of opportunity that is before us. And it’s not about legacy; it’s about living. It’s not about how to preserve our church; it’s about how to *be* the church, and to live into the questions that will bring us the fresh breezes of Holy Spirit that will blow through this place, leaving not a single cobweb of regret over a past that is gone, nor anxiety about a future yet to be determined. Spirit brings us to *now*. The present moment is the only place we live, breathe, change, and grow. And so, let me invite you in our very first moments together to come live and serve with me in the NOW. And for the next few weeks leading up to Easter, I am hoping to explore a new sense of openness to this very energy, today focusing on our open hands.

Today’s text is from Paul’s classic passage in the letter to the Philippians where he says that Jesus did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. In other words, whatever it was that Jesus had—and I admit that the longer I live, the less I know about that—whatever it was, he didn’t have to hang onto it. He could let it go, he could let it be, he could let things be. This echoes his prayer in the garden that said in effect, “I’d rather it would be *this* way, but if it can’t be this way, then so be it.” If the sacrifice needed to be made, then it would be made, and it would be the right thing in the NOW. And the words of Paul then encourage us to let the same mindfulness be in us as we let go of the need to control, to plan, to make it all happen after our own desires and designs. We must recognize a larger purpose than our own, one that expresses the common good as opposed to my own good. Holding it all with an open hand, and giving the Spirit freedom to act as it will.

The other night I met with the Spirit Life team in the Seminar Room during a howling windstorm, and all I could think about was how here we were in this little space making all our detailed plans, while the Spirit was blowing wildly around us, messing up our hair, and perhaps taking us to places we never thought possible.

I am here today because I want to see where Spirit will take us. But this can only happen if we hold this space and this moment with open hands. We all want this to succeed. We all have ideas. We all have abilities, desires, gifts, and resources of one kind or another. The tendency then is to say, "By golly we are going to make it work!" No. Actually, we're not. And to illustrate this further, there's a simplistic aphorism that I'm trying very hard to avoid, and it's found on the bumper sticker that says, "Let go and let God." And it gets worse than that. There's the schmaltzy sentimental greeting card from the seventies that says, "If you love something, let it go free. If it returns to you, it's yours forever; if it does not, it was never meant to be." I really cannot stand it. However, unfortunately there is some truth to it.

This thing that we call Community Congregational Church, or CCC, is not mine. It's not yours. It's not even ours. We hold it, we serve here, we live and love here, but it's not something for us to grab and hang on to, any more than we would clutch a young vine to protect it from the wind. In the clutching of it we cause it to die, and this would be a sad thing for a vine or for a faith community.

There is an experienced ministerial colleague of mine who told the story of one of the churches she served. This particular congregation had come to the conclusion that in order to sustain themselves they would need to sell their building and relocate. One morning a parishioner came to her study and knocked on the door and said forthrightly, "I was baptized in this church, confirmed in this church, married in this church, my children were baptized in this church. I intend to be buried from this church." To which my friend replied, "Well, I have some time next Tuesday." I can imagine the two of them collapsing into laughter as the point was driven home.

We do not alone determine our destiny. We can envision, we can prepare, we can dream, and we can cultivate the ground. We can even plant the seeds and water them, but the growing of those seedlings comes from a completely different place. It's an energy we call *life*, it's the energy that beats our hearts, that keeps us breathing involuntarily. It brings us health and vitality and the desire for each new day.

As we move through these next few weeks, I would like us to begin to ask ourselves, individually and collectively, "What would we love to see happen in this place?" In other words, if time or money or resources, both human and otherwise, were not an issue, if there were no scarcity, no lack, no limitation, what would we as a spiritual community love to be? What would we love to do in the world? What would we love to have that we could share with others? And if we then could take that vision of what we would love and simply hold it in an open hand, let it breathe, let it come and go, let it grow, let it happen, let it be .... I don't think eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has there been a human mind that could comprehend what could happen if Divine Spirit had that kind of freedom.

We shall continue to understand our demographics. We will pursue the vision. We will reach across generational lines to understand our very different spiritual needs and journeys. We'll employ every tool in our toolbox if necessary to make sure we are doing the best we possibly can. But the outcome we must surrender, you see. Ultimately the only response is "Not my will."

So, let's get busy and create something wonderful and beautiful together, and together let us hold that creation with open hands and watch it fly and soar and celebrate. In the process, we will find ourselves flying and soaring, and celebrating.

May it be so.

