

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

August 6, 2017, Pastor Jeff Harrison

Open or Close?

Acts 11:19-30; 12:25-13:3

I. Introduction:

A. Special Announcement – Family Growth Gathering

Good morning, and thanks to all who made our Family Growth Gathering such a great event. Our Youth Ministry showed they are true masters of the grill, our volunteers did an amazing job inspiring the kids' faith, and our experienced couples blessed all with their transparency and wisdom on relationships, marriage, and parenting.

And now I'm excited to share with you about our third Family Growth Gathering. We've got a very special guest, John Dyer, speaking on a very important topic. John will help us think biblically about how we use media and technology and give parents ideas for equipping their kids to use media and technology well.

And John is equipped to speak on faith and technology, having a Masters of Theology degree and having worked as a web developer for over 10 years, building tools for Apple, Microsoft, and Harley Davidson. John has even written a very helpful book on the subject, *From the Garden to the City*, along with articles for *Christianity Today*, so we're excited for John to join us.

And to make it easier for more of us to be blessed by John, our next Family Growth Gathering will be in two weeks on Sunday morning. John will speak in our 9:30 and 11am services on August 20th. Then after second service that day we'll have snacks and a question and answer session with John from 12:30-1. And while the teens and adults have a Q&A with John, to make things easier for parents, we'll provide lunch for your kids elementary age and younger while teaching them about Augustine, another hero of the faith.

To help us plan the snacks for the teens and adults and lunch for the kids, please sign up in the coffee shop today if you're staying after second service on August 20th for the Q&A and kids' activities, and you can sign up there to volunteer as well. I'm confident you won't want to miss our third Family Growth Gathering.

B. Jeff's story shows our temptation to live with closed hands

Now, they say that confession is good for the soul, so as we continue our Acts series, I'll start with a confession. Back when our son Grant turned two, he got a wooden bead, wire maze

toy for his birthday. And Grant so happened to already have that toy. So we knew it came from Ikea, and we aren't trekking to Round Rock to return a \$10 toy, so it goes in the closet.

Not long after that, we have a couple over for dinner with a boy younger than Grant. We're talking as the toddlers play, and Grant starts moving the beads through the wires, and the other boy is entranced by this mind-blowing bead toy. So his dad mentions how they need to get him one. And in that moment my wife Stephanie shoots me a quick, non-verbal look that says, "Let's give them our extra bead toy." Because my wife is a nice person.

But in that moment, would you believe your Pastor of Family Ministries gave his wife the quick "no" head shake. And it wasn't because I planned on donating the toy. No, I was thinking, we've just been through some tight years financially in seminary and we're going to lots of kid birthday parties these days, we need to re-gift this toy. And besides, this family makes more than we do, they can afford a \$10 toy themselves.

In that moment, I had an opportunity. To bless a child with a toy he'd love, to deepen the connection between our families with a kind gesture, to model generosity to my son, to build the habit of generosity, and to honor my heavenly Father, who's been ridiculously generous to me. I could have opened my hand, yet instead, I closed it, clutching an unnecessary second toy sitting in my closet.

B. What happens if our hands stay open?

Now I'm guessing I'm not the only one who's closed my hand around a possession. And it's not only about being stingy with possessions or money, but also about if we close our hands with our time, our talents, even around our preferences.

Now we all have limits, we're not God. So we can't open our hands to everyone's need. But we all have opportunities to open our hands and bless; or to close them, an opportunity passing us by.

Now I bet all of us believe in generosity. In fact, living and giving generously is one of our church's core values. We want to be generous with time, talent, and treasure inside and outside of Northwest as good stewards, because of God's extravagant generosity towards us.

But in life we get worn down, fill our schedules with too much, face unexpected hardships, and it becomes easy to close our hands. Sometimes even when we have more than we need we're tempted to close our hands, clutching blessings God gave us to share.

Sometimes, like say after clutching an unneeded bead toy, I can wonder, can we live a lifestyle of open hands? Can we be a church always with open hands? Well the Bible book of Acts speaks to this subject. So if you've got a Bible, turn to Acts chapter 11. Here we'll see how the early church responded to choices to open or close their hands.

II. Antioch's choices to open or close their hands

A. The temptation to close hands in suffering (Acts 11:19-21)

While you're turning to Acts 11, let me tell you about the book. Acts is about the early church, those first followers of Jesus. In Acts, God works through the church to spread the good news of Jesus despite great opposition. Early in the church's existence, thousands start life changing relationships with Jesus. And these new Christians open their hands in the city of Jerusalem, blessing their neighbors.

So Satan opposes the flourishing church community. Now we're not talking about red, pitchfork wielding Satan, but we are talking about a real, evil spiritual being who attacks. And one way Satan loves to tempt Christians to close their hands is through suffering.

Back in Acts chapters 6-8, Steven, a church leader, is publicly killed for his faith. Persecution breaks out, with many Christians having to flee Jerusalem to save their lives. And a man named Saul travels around hunting for Christians to throw in prison.

Here in Acts 11, we find out what happens to some of the persecuted Christians fleeing Jerusalem, seeing if they'll keep their hands open, or close them. Please follow along as I read in Acts 11, starting in verse 19.

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.

²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

These persecuted Christians faced hard times. God forbid, but imagine someone here was killed for sharing the gospel and then a persecution broke out and some of us had to flee San Antonio to avoid prison, or worse.

And then after a couple of weeks of difficult travel, you arrive in your new city. And you hear there's someone, like Saul, searching for Christians to imprison. And you probably don't

know yet who you can trust in this new city. Worried about your safety, it'd be tempting to close your hands and never share about Jesus. That's what got you in this mess in the first place.

Sometimes way smaller things distract me. Closing my hands during a really busy week as all I think about is everything I need to get done. Closing my hands to an opportunity to share the gospel because it might get uncomfortable talking about spiritual things.

Thankfully, these early Christians choose the harder yet better path of open hands. Some, as verse 20 says, have hands so open that they share the gospel with all kinds of people, no matter the cultural barriers, discomfort, or risk.

And many of these generous Christians end up in Antioch, one of the largest cities of the Roman world. And there, as these Christians open hands, God moves. As verse 21 says, many begin to follow Jesus. And this great move of God in birthing a new church does not happen through the apostles. Or to put it in modern terms, this church is not birthed through a famous pastor and killer worship band starting a service. Rather, God's hand moves through ordinary Christians, like us, as they keep open hands in hard times.

B. The temptation to close hands when honored (Acts 11:22-26)

So as the church in Jerusalem gets word about what's happening in Antioch, verse 22 says that they send Barnabas to check things out.

Now we met Barnabas back in Acts 4. There we learn he's an open-hands kind of guy, selling his land to fund the church's mission. And he's not just generous financially. Barnabas' real name is Joseph, but he's such a great encourager that the apostles nickname him Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement."

And in Acts chapter 9, Saul, the guy persecuting Christians, claims to have faith, and guess who encourages Saul and convinces other Christians to trust Saul, Barnabas. Now, let's see how Barnabas responds as he sees what's going on in Antioch, starting in verse 23.

²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Barnabas is glad to see God working in this multicultural church and encourages them to remain true to God. And God continues to bless, as verse 24 says, more follow Jesus. Now I bet Antioch loves Barnabas, when he's is around, you just feel better, encouraged. And as the leader sent from the original church in Jerusalem, Barnabas' acceptance gave Antioch a stamp of

approval. And after Barnabas came their ministry continued to grow. And I bet they loved hearing Barnabas' stories about the amazing things God did in Jerusalem.

And when, like Barnabas, we're greatly appreciated, whether in a ministry, or on a sports team, or at work, it's tempting to close our hands. To not want someone with more charisma or beauty or talent to come in and make us feel less important. Let's see how Barnabas deals with this temptation as we look at verse 25.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Now the church of Antioch has tons of new Christians, and some are from Gentile backgrounds and know very little about God, so they need help growing in their new faith.

And rather than be the star disciple-maker, Barnabas brings Saul. Barnabas knew that Saul, who we know as Paul the apostle, was an amazing theologian and called by God Himself to be the key apostle to the Gentiles. So, it was inevitable Paul would overshadow Barnabas's ministry. Yet Barnabas opens his hands, actually traveling to find Paul and then Barnabas playing the supportive role. And for the next year, Antioch is equipped by the amazing team of Paul and Barnabas.

Now I'm wondering how this Barnabas is so open handed with everything. Selling his property to fund the church, encouraging everyone around him, believing in Saul the persecutor when he became a Christian, inviting Paul the apostle to take over as ministry star, putting aside his previous plans to disciple the new Christians in Antioch a whole year. Look back at verse 24 with me. Notice that Barnabas is full of God's Spirit. He's not mustering up this ever present generosity in his own strength. Rather, Barnabas stays close to God, and so God's generosity flows through Barnabas.

C. The temptation to close hands in scarcity (Acts 11:27-30)

But can we live like Barnabas? I mean, God called Barnabas to play an unusually significant role. I'm pretty sure no one will talk about us 2,000 years from now, like we are about Barnabas. So let's look at how the regular Christians in Antioch live, starting in verse 27.

²⁷ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)

So this prophet Agabus prophecies a severe famine will spread. And history tells us multiple famines occur during Claudius' reign. Look back at verse 28 with me; notice Agabus prophesies the entire Roman world, which includes Antioch, will experience severe famine.

So these young Christians in Antioch hear that food insecurity and empty stomachs are coming. Let's see what they do in verse 29.

²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Out of love for their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem who brought the life changing message of Jesus, Antioch opens their hands.

Imagine how the primarily Jewish church of Jerusalem felt when Barnabas and Saul arrive with money from this church with a bunch of Gentiles who're 300 miles away. I bet they're encouraged and inspired to keep their hands open too. And perhaps Jesus' words came to mind, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

D. The temptation to close hands in blessing (Acts 12:25-13:3)

Now in Acts 12 there's another amazing story we'll cover next Sunday. But for now, we're jumping to the end of Acts 12, which picks back up the story of Antioch. Please follow along as I read, starting with chapter 12, verse 25.

²⁵ When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark. ¹ Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Here we see one last temptation to close our hands, in blessing. For example, maybe you're really enjoying your small group, you have lots of fun and are honest about your struggles and really help each other follow Jesus. But then, you sense God wants your group to multiply to reach more people with the love of Jesus. You'll have to start over with new relationships that may not end up as life giving. In those moments, will we try to grasp to the blessings of the past, or open our hands?

In the case of multiplying a small group, there's at least a chance that in the long run you'll like your new group better. But for Antioch, whoever's replacing the apostle Paul as main

theologian will be a downgrade. And no one is going to encourage and inspire quite like Barnabas. Yet Antioch opens their hands again, freeing their best leaders for the sake of helping more people in more places start life changing relationships with Jesus.

How's this church so generous? Look at verse 2 of chapter 13 with me. Notice that the leadership team, before freeing their best leaders, is worshipping the Lord and fasting. Like Barnabas and Paul, these lesser known Christians were not super humans, they just kept drawing close to God, and it's God's Spirit empowering them to keep opening their hands. And if we're going to keep our hands open like this, we too must draw near to God. Coming to worship only occasionally and reading our Bibles and praying only every once in a while won't cut it. Day after day, week after week, we must draw near to God, reading the Bible, praying, serving, giving, worshipping on Sunday morning, cultivating Jesus-centered friendships, in all of it inviting God's generosity to flow through us.

E. The impact of Antioch's open hands

What happens if hands stay open? In the coming weeks we'll see that Antioch's open hands led to Paul and Barnabas planting new churches in many cities, the good news of Jesus spreading over the Roman world. Imagine all the people whose eternal destinies were changed by the mission born out of Antioch, not to mention all the people reached by those people. Even we share in the blessings of Antioch's open hands, for much of the New Testament was written by Paul to these churches that Antioch sent him to.

What if those ordinary Christians from Jerusalem who fled to Antioch were too afraid to share the gospel? Or what if Barnabas cared too much about being honored to invite Paul to Antioch? Or what if Paul and Barnabas were so focused on their previous plans that they wouldn't invest a year ministering in Antioch.

Or imagine if the Antioch church closed its hands and didn't help Jerusalem. Do you think God would have used a church focused on themselves to be the sending church that spreads the gospel all over the Roman world? Or what if Paul and Barnabas decide they've got a good thing going in Antioch and aren't willing to sacrifice to plant churches elsewhere.

Thankfully along the way they all kept their hands open, and God authors an amazing story! If you told those persecuted Christians fleeing from Jerusalem to Antioch what God would do if they kept their hands open, they would've never believed you. Imagine telling them, "Listen, I know you're fleeing your home in fear, but as you make it to an unfamiliar city and

share the gospel there, God will birth this amazing, multiethnic church. And that church you help plant, it's going to send money back to the Jerusalem church, the one you're having to flee now, so that Jerusalem can make it through a coming famine. And you know that guy Saul, who's currently hunting us down, well God's going to save him, and he's going to come to your future church with Barnabas, and you'll send them out to plant churches all over the empire and they'll write letters to those churches that will become part of the Bible. And speaking of God's Word, your story in Antioch will be recorded in this book called Acts, and two thousand years later, Christians will still be inspired by your open hands. There will even be churches calling themselves Antioch because they're carrying on your legacy of open handed gospel generosity."

III. Conclusion

A. The story of Encuentro shows the impact of open hands

Only God, and God's not finished authoring stories, He still works through ordinary Christians like us at Northwest, if we'll stay close to Him and keep opening our hands. As I thought about this passage, Encuentro, our Spanish speaking ministry, came to mind. How the Abarca family opened their hands to God, coming to San Antonio to start Encuentro. And we got to choose whether to open or close our hands to the opportunity to partner in ministry.

We could have thought, "Well, we're a relatively small church, we're not sure we'll have enough money to keep our ministry going and give towards Encuentro, and parts of our building are showing their age, and that'll get worse with another group using it. And when people from Northwest join Encuentro, we'll have less volunteers and finances while having extra work helping shepherd a new ministry."

I'm so thankful we didn't close our hands to Encuentro, like I did with that bead toy. For God has already blessed our open hands, enriching us with more multicultural relationships and joint language worship services, with getting to watch Encuentro already baptize a dozen people whose eternal destinies have changed, with getting an unexpected source of funding to tear down a wall and update this room so Encuentro can worship here in Spanish, with additional unexpected funding to update our other worship center. Not to mention the mission trip between Encuentro and Northwest currently in Chile, which I like to think the multicultural church of Antioch is cheering for up in heaven.

And Encuentro is just getting started. Who knows how many more people will start life changing relationships with Jesus, how the under-resourced will be further served, how

marriages might be healed and addictions overcome, and what additional Spanish speaking ministries, or ministries in third or fourth languages that we might plant with Encuentro.

It all started when God invited us to open our hands. And I find it interesting that as we look at this amazingly generous church in Antioch, this is the week we find out about a coming 2 million dollar sale. I wonder, if we keep our hands open, looking to steward that money however God leads us, what kind of story God will delight to author here.

B. The Lord's Supper inspires us to open our hands

So please join the elders in praying and dreaming about that, and as we conclude our service, I can't think of a better inspiration to open hands than taking the Lord's Supper. In a minute we'll distribute bread and juice. If you do not yet know Jesus as your Savior, please let the bread and cup pass. Instead, come to Jesus, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead. For we'd love to see you join our generous God's family this morning.

If you know Jesus as Savior and are pursuing Him, you are welcome to participate. Please wait until all have been served so we can take the elements together, for we are God's family, in this together. Ushers, please come forward to prepare to distribute the bread. And after we finish taking the bread and the cup, please take your conversations to the coffee shop or outside so Encuentro can set up for their service. And thanks to our brothers and sisters in Encuentro for opening their hands by changing their service times for us the past few weeks. Now, let's pray as we prepare to take the Lord's Supper...

Right before Jesus was betrayed and killed, He ate the Passover meal with His disciples. At Passover the Jews celebrate God delivering them from their Egyptian slave-masters through the death of a lamb. While celebrating His last Passover, Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper, where Christians celebrate our deliverance from sin through the death of Jesus, the lamb of God.

And after instituting the Lord's Supper, Jesus, in the ultimate expression of generosity, chooses the cross. There He suffers not only incredible physical anguish, but even deeper spiritual anguish as He takes the wrath for all our sins, so that we could be forgiven and enjoy intimacy with this amazing God of love, forever. As 2 Corinthians 8 says it, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

And there on the cross, Jesus didn't just open a hand to you, He opened both arms wide, allowing them to be nailed to a cross for me and you. And the more we understand and

experience Jesus' incredible generosity towards us, the more we'll open our hands. And live in the countercultural way of His kingdom, where it is more blessed to give than to receive.

This bread represents Christ's body, given for us. Eat it in joyful remembrance of Him. **Pray.**

This cup represents Christ's blood, spilled for us. Drink it in joyful remembrance of Him. **Pray**

Dismissal – Don't forget to sign up next door for the Family Growth Gathering in two weeks, and go in peace to love and serve the Lord.