

The Gift of Giving

THE OPEN HANDS OF GOD

Guess how much I love you.

Little Nutbrown Hare, who was going to bed, held on tight to Big Nutbrown Hare's very long ears. He wanted to be sure that Big Nutbrown Hare was listening. "Guess how much I love you," he said. "Oh, I don't think I could guess that," said Big Nutbrown Hare. "This much," said Little Nutbrown Hare, stretching out his arms as wide as they could go. Big Nutbrown Hare had even longer arms. "But I love YOU this much," he said. Hmm, that is a lot, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. "I love you as high as I can reach," said Little Nutbrown Hare. "I love you as high as I can reach," said Big Nutbrown Hare. That is quite high, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. I wish I had arms like that.

Then Little Nutbrown Hare had a good idea. He tumbled upside down and reached up the tree trunk with his feet. "I love you all the way up to my toes!" he said. "And I love you all the way up to your toes," said Big Nutbrown Hare, swinging him up over his head. "I love you as high as I can HOP!" laughed Little Nutbrown Hare, bouncing up and down. "But I love you as high as I can hop," smiled Big Nutbrown Hare – and he hopped so high that his ears touched the branches above. That's good hopping, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. I wish I could hop like that.

"I love you all the way down the lane as far as the river," cried Little Nutbrown Hare. "I love you across the river and over the hills," said Big Nutbrown Hare. That's very far, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. He was almost too sleepy to think any more. Then he looked beyond the thorn bushes, out into the big dark night. Nothing could be further than the sky. "I love you right up to the MOON," he said, and closed his eyes. "Oh, that's far said Big Nutbrown Hare. "That is very, very far."

Big Nutbrown Hare settled Little Nutbrown Hare into his bed of leaves. He leaned over and kissed him good night. Then he lay down close by and whispered with a smile, "I love you right up to the moon – AND BACK."¹

Guess how much I love you. How much? More than you could ever imagine!
God so loved the world that he gave How much? More than you could ever imagine! God so loved the world that he gave...

Did you know that when you were born, you were born with your fists clenched? How are they now? When someone puts a finger into the hand of a tiny baby – they grab it and close their hand around it. It's instinctive – nobody taught them to do it – it's just what babies do. It is said that if you hang a small baby by its hands on wall bars – it can hang on! Nobody teaches them, it's just what they do.

It is one of the most natural things we do – to clutch onto things and hold onto them.

Toddler's Property Law

If I like it it's mine....

If it's in my hands it's mine.

If I can take it from you, it's mine.

If I had it awhile ago, it's mine.

If you want it, it's mine.

If it's mine, it must never appear to be yours in any way.

If it looks like mine, it's mine.

If I saw it first, it's mine.

If you're playing with something and you put it down, it automatically becomes mine.

If I'm building something, all the pieces are mine.

If it's broken, it's yours.....

We can spend our whole life doing it – clutching and holding - there's always something else we want to clutch at and hold onto. Perhaps when you were younger it was a bike and you held on tightly to the handle bars! As you got older perhaps it was exams, or diplomas or qualifications or a degree, and you came out of school, college or university clutching your certificate. Then you started a career or a job – on the lowest rung of the ladder – but you held on! Then you reached for the next one, and the next. Sometimes you might have to jump from one ladder to another – but you desperately want to hang on.

When you're retired perhaps it'll be your golf clubs or your gardening tools, your pension fund or your social security. You know, maybe some people only relax their grip when finally they die.

But God so loved that he gave.... Sometimes we rush to the end of this verse and if we do perhaps we miss what is a deep, deep truth: For God.... so loved.... that he gave!

For God so loved that he gave us his most wonderful creation, and when he'd finished, he looked at it and said: "Behold this is very good." As human beings we have amassed a huge amount of knowledge about ourselves and the world in which we live, it is incredibly intricate and complex. There is much that we still don't understand about the world in which we live, but what we do understand shows us what an astonishingly good creation this is!

God gave it to us and said: "There – go and enjoy it!" All through his journey with people God has given and given and given.... When they wandered in the desert, God gave to his people every day. Every day for 40 years he fed them with manna and gave them enough. During 40 years of wandering their clothes did not wear out nor did the sandals on their feet. (Deuteronomy 29 v 5) He gave them a land of their own; he gave them an astonishingly good way to live as a community – the 10 commandments. He gave and gave and gave.

Jeremiah proclaimed: "His compassions never fail, they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3 v 22-23) God's kindness and

generosity are not fading; his attitude and longing towards us is not changing; his resources are not drying up, for the heart of God towards the people he created is still open. His open hands still long to shower his children with goodness and blessing. “For God so loved..... that he gave .. his one and only son.” He gave because he loves. How much does he love? All the way to the cross.... and back! He loves you.... because he loves you because he loves you.

For God so loves that he opened his hands and gave you..... Jesus. He gave his most generous excellent best. And Jesus, did not hold onto or grasp that which was already and rightfully his. In fact, he freely chose to let go of all that he had, to leave the safety and security of heaven, and to come to earth. As he grew he chose to open his hands and give. He gave to those in need and healed the sick with open hands, he fed the hungry with open hands, he freed people from bondage with open hands, he gave and he gave and he gave.

God gave us hands; hands to create, to build and to work; hands to love and to care and to heal. But we use those hands to destroy, to tear down and to cheat; we use those hands to hate and to hurt and to wound. God opened his hands and gave us Jesus, but we took those hands and nailed them to a cross. And as we did so Jesus said: “This is how much I love you!” And he stretched his arms and opened his hands and gave.... his life!

The most profound truth in the bible is that when someone, anyone, comes to God, they will be welcomed with open arms and open hands. Perhaps you need to come to God today – now – this hour as we meet to worship. You will be welcomed if it’s your first time or the millionth time.

God so loved that he gave. God so loved that he is still giving. God has greatly blessed us with so much:

- Family, friends, home, food, clothes, hot water
- He’s given us grace, hope, love, freedom, release, liberty
- If we have a choice of clothes – we are greatly blessed
- If we have a choice of food – we are greatly blessed.

It is the very nature of God to give and give and give and to go on giving. Do you remember the story of the two trees? It's amazing what you sometimes find up a tree isn't it! When I told the story of the two trees – one which had apples, and one up which Zacchaeus was found – it was the story of risky love: the open hands of God reaching out to someone who he wasn't supposed to love. Thing is, that when the open hands of God's generous love is received by someone, anyone, and even Zacchaeus, it becomes the story of a changed heart. A heart that was once a grabbing heart that clutched and held onto whatever it could get, becomes a giving heart - clenched hands become open hands.

I wonder what the conversation between Zacchaeus and Jesus was! Maybe it went along these lines:

“Zacchaeus you're clutching at things which you think will make you happy. And you are hanging onto them so tightly. But, the truth is, that you were never made to live life this way. You were made to be in a deep relationship with my Father and in community with other people. You seem to want to settle for less and you want to do it by holding onto money and possessions. Zacchaeus, very soon I'm going to give you a generous gift – I'm going to open my hands and let them be nailed to a cross. I will take your sin and greed, your selfishness and your lack of love – and give you the opportunity to know God. And then, I'm going to walk the journey with you and give you everything you need – because that's what I do. I will give you the gift of prayer; I will be with you in good times and bad, the easy times and the difficult times. And one day I'll welcome you with open hands to your place in heaven.” And somewhere, at some point, in response to the open hands of God through Jesus, Zacchaeus's heart was changed and transformed.

Luke 18 v 8: “ Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times this amount.” A generous response to a generous God.

Friends, the simple truth is, that you will never be able to out give God. Take a look at your hands. Take a look at his hands. How do you respond to the open, generous hands of God?

God so loved that he gave... “You have no idea of the joy it brings me to give to you with abundant generosity.” I wonder how God must feel when the testimony of our lives is one of a changed heart in response to his open hands – when we are able to say: “You have no idea of the joy it brings me to open my hands and give out of what my heavenly Father has graciously given to me out of his abundant generosity.”

And when Ian had settled down in his bed to sleep, his heavenly Father kissed his forehead with the moon’s light and he whispered: “My precious child, I love you all the way to the cross and back!”

1. McBratney S and Jeram J: *“Guess How Much I Love You”*, Walker Books 1994

Preached at Crawley Baptist church on Sunday 15th March 2009 by Rev. Ian Phillips.