

Unclenching Our Fists at Last
Romans 12:16-18
(So far as possible, live peaceably with all . . .)

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Visualize the apostle Paul as he spoke to the people in Rome. He was both *passionate* and *realistic* conveying Jesus' teachings: "**If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.**" Paul was being hopeful, but also realistic, when he said, "**If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.**" I hope to be realistic today, yet also to rekindle some of the passion for peace of Jesus and Paul.

A decade from now some of you may refer to me as your "former pastor, the one who preached the Gospel according to both Pauls—the Apostle Paul and the singer/song writer Paul Simon. Both of these Pauls are realistic, even as they help us to imagine peace.

Listen to some of the lyrics of Paul Simon's song entitled *Quiet*, "I am heading for a time of quiet when my restlessness is past and I can lie down on my blanket and **release my fists at last.** . . ."¹ Our congregational prayer today, written by United Methodist pastor Ted Loder, also speaks of "unclenched moments."

I want to believe that it is realistic to release our fists way more often than we do. In the children's message, we named three reasons we might make a fist:
---because we're anxious, stressed
--to hold on tightly to something we don't want to lose
--to get ready to fight someone

Let's look at stress. I remember vividly when each of our children said to me, at different times, "What is stress?" Both times I laughed—"Oh, to have to ask!"

It is possible that the Junior and Senior years of high school are the most stressful years of people's lives. But then so is the year of a wedding or years leading up to retirement, or the first year with a child, or the year one is a parent of a senior in high school—well, almost any year can be stressful!

Maybe, so far as possible, we can find ways to let go of our anxiety and competitiveness, to loosen up—while we're living. This may take a big dose of faith. We may still study for the SAT when we're 17 or research everything we can find out about cholesterol when we're 50, but we could know that no matter what our *numbers* are on either of those—we'll figure out, with God's help, what to do. We can *follow* our paths without being *driven* on them.

We "make a fist" out of stress, and with calm faith, we can unclench our fists at last.

We also "make a fist" as we hold onto things. Sometimes this is good, so we don't lose something we need to keep. However, especially in a time of economic instability, we may hold on too-tightly to our possessions. Even in economically stable times, we have a tendency to hold onto our past, or our desires for the future. Sometimes we hold on a little bit too tightly to our parents, our children...

Is it possible to unclench our fists all the way, so that we let go of our *fear of losing something? Can we do this sooner, rather than later?*

It's difficult to let go of each other, even when we have to. My sister and I whispered to our parents, when each of them was near death, "You can go. We love you, and we'll be okay; we let go." Several nurses in hospitals have told me that they tell families that dying relatives often need permission to die. They encourage the close family members to offer assurance to their loved ones that they'll be able to carry on without them, they'll be able to let go.

There's an anecdote about a man who was desperately hanging on to the *only thing around*. He couldn't hold on for much longer, and could barely breathe, but was afraid to let go. Finally, he just couldn't hold on any longer, so he did let go. Lo and behold, what he had been holding onto was an anchor. When he let go, he rose to the top of the water and finally could breathe.

Many of us manage to let go of stuff. Far more difficult, we let go of people when we have to. As we release, we discover *over time and to our surprise* that eventually we can at least breathe again. *So far as possible, as far as it depends upon us, we make room for peace.*

There's a third reason we clench our fists—to get ready to fight. The Apostle Paul is writing to Christians who are living in Rome. Paul assumes that there will be hostility toward Christians. Repeatedly Paul states that the appropriate response to any persecution is to bless, not to curse.² Paul stands firmly with Jesus, as did the vast majority of early Christians. *It's important for us to realize that these early Christians, in following Jesus' teaching and his own practice, were ushering in an entirely new ethic.* No longer was the ethic, an "eye for an eye."³ Instead, they tried to take careful thought, to hold their heads up, and to seek to live at peace with everyone.⁴

I'm encouraged that this week leaders of countries with diverse backgrounds of faith are talking, opening their hands enough to shake hands, and opening hearts and minds enough to talk face to face. We each have our role to play; we are here, not at some world conference today. Yet wherever we are, there is peace to be making.

I can think of only a few scenarios where clenched fists are really useful: Playing rock, paper, scissors; playing one potato, two potatoes, three potatoes more; and helping the one who draws our blood to find a good blood vessel.

A teacher held a small bird in her hands, so that it was not visible. She asked a student whether the bird was alive or dead. The student thought for a long while, and then said, **"It's in your hands."**

Indeed, the fate of the bird was in the hands of the teacher.

*Sometimes things are not "in our hands." They are "out of our hands"—in the hands of others. And sometimes options are **not** possible for us because all things don't depend upon us alone. BUT—the Apostle Paul was trying to be realistic in applying Jesus' radical teachings. And Jesus practiced what he preached. Maybe we, too, can have more "Unclenched Moments"—maybe we can "release our fists" of stress, holding on, or readiness to fight. *So far as it depends upon us, let's not wait.**

¹ "Quiet," by Paul Simon. Words:

² Matt 5:38-48, Luke 6:28-35, 23-34, Acts 7:60, I Cor. 4:12, I Pet 2:20-23; 3-9; Eph 5:1...

³ I Thes. 5:15 and echoes Proverbs 20:22

⁴ One of the meaningful movies we watched on a Wednesday evening here was *The Long Walk Home*. This movie is about two families, one white and one black. The setting is the Montgomery Bus Boycott which began when Rosa Parks wouldn't give up her seat on the bus to a white person. The teenaged girl of the black family in the movie wanted to see her boyfriend across town and was getting tired of the boycott, so one day she just rode the bus. But then three white guys chased after her. The girl's younger brother arrived and tried to defend his sister against the three much bigger teen-aged boys. They punched him, and he *clenched his fists*. Then—the Apostle Paul would have been proud of him—he stood up tall, *with his fists at his sides, and slowly unclenched them as he looked straight at the three attackers*. This boy gets beaten up a little. But he held his ground, his values. It's not an accident that the boy made that decision. The movie had shown his family going to church virtually every evening, hearing preachers like Martin Luther King Jr., who insisted that the boycott of riding the buses had to be nonviolent to be effective. They were being encouraged *so far as possible, as far as it depended upon them, to live peaceably*.