

TWENTY

Open Hands

It's dangerous, opening your hands.

—Nora Gallagher

I RESIST IT EVERY TIME.

All the way down the aisle and up the steps to the altar I fidget, folding and unfolding my arms, clasping and unclasping my hands, forcing my mouth into a pleasant, inconspicuous smile as my eyes greet the faces of the congregants who have gone before me.

There is organ and choir and stifled coughs and babies' cries.

There is incense and hair spray and old church and cheap perfume.

My knees hit the pillow beneath the altar rail and light from the stained glass dapples my skin. It's as vulnerable a posture as a body can assume: kneeling, hands cupped together and turned out—expectant, empty, exposed—waiting to receive. I resist it every time, this childlike surrender, this public reification of *need*.

Prayer, at least, offers some protection with its clasped hands, bowed heads, closed eyes. But here at the table I am open, unsheltered. The lines on my palms are dry creek beds in a basin awaiting water. I am a little girl crouched beneath the spigot.

The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven.

Jesus descends into my open hands.

The Blood of Christ, the Cup of Salvation.

Jesus slips in, through my parted lips.

“If we did nothing else,” writes Nora Gallagher, “if nothing was placed in our hands, we would have done two-thirds of what needed to be done. Which is to admit that we simply do not have all the answers; we simply do not have all the power. It is, as the saying goes, ‘out of our hands.’ ”

“Faith,” she says, “is a catch-and-release sport. And standing at the altar receiving the bread and wine is the release part.”⁴⁷

But I'm no good at the releasing and receiving, at least not without practice. Ours is a culture of achievement, of sufficiency, of bootstrap pulling and ladder climbing. We celebrate the winners, the leaders, the do-it-yourselfers. Like any good American, I like to wait until I think I've *earned*. I like to wait until I think I've *deserved*. With giving, I can maintain some sense of power, some illusion of control. But receiving means the gig is up. Receiving means I'm not the boss of what comes into life—be it trial or trouble or unmerited good.

A writer friend of mine recently sent me a bouquet of orchids that sat on our dining room table for weeks in a perpetual explosion of magenta. She sent them because she knew I was in one of those seasons when I wanted little to do with God and nothing to do with the church. Christians had been cruel to one another and cruel to me, and it had all happened in a public forum. I was in no mood to accept any acts of mercy, particularly from the very sort of Christians against whom I was revolting. Embarrassed by her generosity, I sent a quick thank-you in response and resolved to return the favor sometime. If I owed her, maybe I wouldn't have to let her in.

I was in possession of my friend's gift long before I received it, on a gray day when its stubborn, irresponsible beauty could no longer be ignored. Until then, I didn't want to admit how badly I needed her kindness, how helpless I was at sorting all this out on my own. I didn't want to see myself in those fragile, thirsty orchids, fighting against the gloom to trestle toward the light.

But this friend knows better than most the nature of *eucharisteo*—thanksgiving—how it enters through our soft spots and seeps in through our cracks. She knew God would unclench my fists and unfurl my fingers and that grace would eventually get through.

And so it did, when I finally opened my hands, when I received grace the way I receive communion, with nothing to offer back but thanks.

“Grace cannot prevail,” writes Robert Farrar Capon, “until our lifelong certainty that someone is keeping score has run out of steam and collapsed.”⁴⁸

This is why I need the Eucharist.

I need the Eucharist because I need to begin each week with open hands.

I need the Eucharist because I need to practice letting go and letting in.

I need the Eucharist because I need to quit keeping score.

“No one has been ‘worthy’ to receive communion,” writes Alexander Schmemmann, “no one has been prepared for it. At this point all merits, all righteousness, all devotions disappear and dissolve. Life comes again to us as Gift, a free and divine gift . . . Everything is free, nothing is due and yet all is given. And, therefore, the greatest humility and obedience is to accept the gift, to say yes—in joy and gratitude.”⁴⁹

It’s a scary thing to open your hands. It’s a scary thing to receive, to say yes. I resist it every time. But somehow, whether it sneaks in through a piece of bread, a sip of wine, or a hatching bud, grace always, eventually gets through. And finally, at long last, I exhale my thanksgiving.