

“Open Wide”

This past Friday I was walking back to church from the post office. As I passed the Oyster Bar a woman came out of a shop walked passed me and then called out asking me if I was the rector of the Episcopal Church. I told her that I am. She began to thank me and our congregation for keeping the church open. She said how unusual this is. She went on to tell me that when she is in Middleburg she stops in to the church to pray or just enjoy the peace that she feels while sitting here.

Later in the day about 7:00 p.m. I was working at my desk when a woman came into the Parish House. She told me that she and a friend were on their way to Leesburg to see a movie, when they witnessed a horrible car wreck on Route 15. She was almost certain that someone had died. She told me that they wanted to go into a church, but none of them were open. I told her that Emmanuel is open all the time. She thanked me and she and her friend went up to pray. Her friend came back a short while later to thank us for having the church open for them.

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Today we lit the candle of love. St. Paul told us about many of the attributes of love in First Corinthians chapter thirteen. He writes that, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”¹

One attribute Paul does not mention, at least not in so many words, is openness. Yet that is certainly one of the attributes of love. Love is open. Love is open to people, ways of being, thoughts, truths, passions, and hopes. Love allows us to meet a stranger and not reject the then outright because he or she looks unlike us, speaks differently, dresses differently, and so forth.

Love says to our hearts, “Here is another human being who has the breath of God inside of him or her.” Love says, “Let me come to know this person and how they experience God. Perhaps they have knowledge of God and goodness that I do not. Perhaps I will be enlightened by the love they have for me and for God.”

The openness of love is what allowed Mary to hear the words of the Angel Gabriel. We know that Mary responded with wonder, concern, and also affirmation. But have you ever wondered how many girls (Mary is believed to have been only about fourteen-years-old) Gabriel appeared to before he found the right one? Perhaps Gabriel rather than only appearing to Mary may have approached a number of girls before he found the one with just the right faith, attitude, and willingness to accept the offer to bear God’s son.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a NRSV

Imagine yourself as a teenage girl who is approached by a being who claims to be a messenger from God. Your first reaction might be to think you were having an hallucination or a dream. Perhaps you would think that the devil was trying to trick you. Instead, Luke tells us that Mary “was much perplexed by [the angel’s] words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”² Instead of pondering many of us might be running for our lives.

Mary is able to listen and discern because her faith and love allow her to be open to what God is saying. After hearing the predictions about how she will become pregnant through the Holy Spirit and how her child will be great and called the Son of God, Mary responds by simply saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”³

Mary’s openness to God is an example of how we are to respond to God’s call. When we are baptized we are offered this prayer, “Give *them* an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.”⁴ These are the attributes of Mary and others like her who have accepted God’s call to do something with their life they had not previously anticipated. It might be dedicating their life to service of others, caring for the sick, the poor the marginalized and the oppressed. It could involve becoming a doctor, a teacher, a nurse, a soldier, or any of scores of callings. But what it involves is doing what God asks even if it seems strange and outside of our capacity.

This Advent season let us open our hearts, hands, and minds. Let us open ourselves to the stranger, the marginalized, those seeking hope of a new life without threats of violence and extortion. Let us open ourselves to the improbable and even the impossible. As Gabriel said to Mary, “nothing will be impossible with God.”⁵

² Luke 1:29 NRSV

³ Luke 1:38 NRSV

⁴ The Book of Common Prayer, 1979, page 308

⁵ Luke 1:37 NRSV