

What Does Love Make Possible?

In this season of expectation, it is a gift to be gathered today via live stream and in this house of worship on land which has been loved by First Nations and other people long before us and which we hope will be cherished long into the future.

As we move deeper into the Advent season, scriptures beckon us to pause, to find stillness, and to reflect upon deep truths of our faith. Several weeks ago, the theme of hope invited us to wonder: Do we plant seeds of hope? The theme of peace invited us to wonder: How can we prepare space for peace? Last Sunday, the theme of joy invited us to wonder: How will we share joy? Today, the theme of love invites us to wonder: What does love make possible?

As we begin this time of reflection, let's join our hearts together in prayer: God of tender love beyond our imagining – God of all and God within each of us – as we move beyond the longest night of the year and toward the light of Christmas Day, further open our hearts and our minds today to let your presence in and through the life of Mary affect the ways we live. Holy Spirit, breathe into us the courage we need for today. Amen.

Friends, Mary of Nazareth invites us to imagine with her the possibility of partnering with love to co-create our lives. She models a posture of **open-hearted honesty** toward whatever love will do in and through her.

bell hooks wrote about openheartedness and honesty in her 1999 book entitled *All About Love: New Visions*. hooks was an African American feminist author, professor, artist and activist who focused much of her writing on the intersectionality among race, capitalism, and gender. Her powerful wisdom lives on through her writings.

hooks wrote about the **openheartedness** that love requires, stating this: *“A generous heart is always open, always ready to receive our going and coming. In the midst of such love we need never fear abandonment. This is the most precious gift true love offers - the experience of knowing we always belong.”* **I wonder: do you experience this generous, openhearted kind of love that fluidly affirms a sense of belonging? Who models it for you? And for whom are you modeling it?**

hooks also addresses in *All About Love: New Visions* the **honesty** that love requires, stating this: *“Choosing to be honest is the first step in the process of love. There is no practitioner of love who deceives...To know love we have to tell the truth to ourselves and others. Creating a false self to mask fears and insecurities has become so common that many of us forget who we are and what we feel underneath the pretense. Breaking through this detail is always the first step in uncovering our longing to be honest and clear.”* Wise words from bell hooks. *“To know love we have to tell the truth to ourselves and others.”* **I wonder: do you tell yourself the truth about what scares you, what inspires you, what drains your energy, what hurts you? With whom are you that honest?** Let’s consider holding on to hooks teaching that love of self and other requires honesty – and see if we will be willing to consider it a mandate for our lives.

I appreciate the raw honesty in Mary’s response to the angel Gabriel announcing that she would become pregnant and bear a child who would be a savior for his people. She was shocked and did not hide her shock. She was deeply troubled and incredulous and let it show. She honored the messenger with her honesty. To the angel’s credit, they held space for Mary’s intense feelings and responded with acknowledgement, encouragement, and affirmation. We could learn from both Mary and the angel how to love others with our honesty and receptivity.

Mary and her cousin Elizabeth model openheartedness as they delight in the new life growing within each of them. As depicted on the cover of our worship bulletin, the two women seemed to fully take one another in. Can you imagine the tightness with which they grasped each other's hands? And who is that friend in your life with whom you grasp hands tightly? The gift of attuning fully to the person beside you is an example of generous loving. Mary then sings in response to learning that her child will be the savior of her people – one to show them the way out of sin and stuckness and back into the heart of God's love. Mary recognizes God's loving presence with her and demonstrates openness to being an instrument of God's love.

Her song seems to have two parts. In the first part, she expresses gratitude for her personal experience of God's love making itself evident in her life. Here are her words as translated from Greek into English in *The Inclusive Bible*: "*My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior. For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant, and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed. For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your Name.*"

The Magnificat is about us as well as our sister Mary. **I wonder: When have you last paused to praise God in one of those moments when all is well enough, or perhaps well beyond what you could have imagined, and you are noticing how love fills your life?**

In the second part of her song, Mary bears witness to God's activity in the world – how people enact God's justice, how people can be instruments of God's love. Mary sings, "*Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you.*"

You have shown strength with your arm; you have scattered the proud in their conceit; you have deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places. You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have sent the rich away empty.”

We know that Mary lived in a time and space within her community while it was being crushed under brutal occupation by the Roman army. Isn't it a marvel, then, that she kept with her the story of God's love for humankind witnessed across the span of time? Isn't it a marvel that she could imagine times ahead of her when the tide would turn toward justice and compassion?

The Magnificat also speaks to all the communities of which we are part today. **I wonder: Do you keep in your heart and mind the timeless story of God's love manifesting itself even in the midst of injustice? Will you allow the Holy Spirit to empower you with that story as you confront injustice and unkindness? Can you image a time ahead of us when people will co-create a tide that turns toward justice and compassion?**

On this Sunday of love, I would like to share with you my favorite Christmas story about love as openhearted and honest. Twenty-three years ago, I was making my way through my first year of college. My family (that is, our parents, my sister Aidan, our brother Sam, and I) spent Christmas 2001 in Silverton, Colorado, a town of 500 people at 9,000 feet of altitude in the southwest corner of the state. We attended Christmas Eve mass at a small Catholic church where the priest shared what has become my favorite contemporary Christmas story. It is a story of deep, tender, openhearted love. I share this story by Will Fish once every few years because it continues to encourage our faith in the Love that is God. It goes like this:

“In 1994, two people from the United States answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach Biblically based morals and ethics in public schools, prisons, businesses, fire and police departments and a large orphanage. One of the visitors described sharing the Christmas story with about one hundred children living in the orphanage.

We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger. The children and orphanage staff sat and listened in amazement, some on the edges of their stools. Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a manger.

Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel were used for the baby’s blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt. The orphans were busy assembling their mangers as I walked among them to see if they needed any help.

I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about six years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the boy’s manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger.

Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately – until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger.

Then Misha started to ad lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said,

‘And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told Him I have no mama and I have no papa, so I don’t have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with Him.

But I told Him I couldn’t, because I didn’t have a gift to give Him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought that maybe if I kept Him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, ‘If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?’

And Jesus told me, ‘If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me.’ So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and He told me I could stay with Him—for always.’

As Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him--for always.” A story from Will Fish.

The presence of the tender, openhearted, honest love of God is very real to me through this story and reverberates within me each time we share it. On Christmas Eve, we will hear these words from the first chapter of the gospel of John: “And the Word became flesh and stayed for a little while among us... filled with grace, filled with truth” (John 1:14).

For Misha, the baby Jesus was someone who understood and shared his deep need for companionship.

I wonder this morning: Do we welcome the Christ child as Misha did, trusting God' love to be present in each and every space where we experience mutual longing for companionship?

Mary and Elizabeth also model for us that mutual longing for companionship. **I wonder: Who in your life has shown you open-hearted, honest determination to accompany another with the warmth of love?**

Siblings in faith: with Mary, let's open ourselves to the wonder – the marvel – of God's love pouring into us and through us to others.

With bell hooks, with Misha, and with Jesus (who learned from Joseph, Mary, and the community that surrounded them), let's love in tender, openhearted, honest ways.

Let's make the possibility of loving companionship a reality for everyone. Love is counting on us. Amen!

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Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:26-45, Luke 1:46-55