

This Is What Love Looks Like

Luke 1:39-45

Jennie Barrett Siegal

Old South Union Church (UCC), Weymouth, Massachusetts

“This is what love looks like.” That’s how I captioned the photo posted on our church’s Facebook page. Love looks like 200 votive candles sitting atop our communion table, shining their light into a darkened sanctuary. The candles had been lit by members of our Youth Group—middle schoolers and high schoolers who had come to the sanctuary to honor a friend who had died in a tragic car accident just the night before. When our Youth Group members enter the building, they usually make their way down to the basement and fill our Fellowship Hall with joy and energy, excitement and delight. But that night, the night after their friend died, they came into the building carrying grief and confusion, shock and despair. Our Youth Group leaders could only imagine the messy mix of emotions the teens were feeling. What we knew for sure was that they needed to be together. They needed a place to bring their grief and shed their tears. They needed a place to ask questions and find support. They needed a place to dwell in the darkness of despair, but we also wanted to give them a way to reach for the light. So we opened up the sanctuary and invited the teens to make their way upstairs where they would find space to pray and candles to light. And then we waited.

To be honest, we had no idea if anyone would come—if anyone would leave the Fellowship Hall and make their way up to the sanctuary. Our Youth Group has hundreds of members—750 teens in grades seven through twelve—but only a small number of them are part of our church. The vast majority of our Youth Group is made up of teens who are only marginally connected to other church communities or who claim no church connection at all. So when we decided to open up the sanctuary as a place to pray and light candles, we had no idea if the teens would find comfort in these ancient practices of faith. As a church, though, we knew we had something to offer that the teens wouldn’t be able to find anywhere else—the promise that light shines even in the darkest of times. And we could give them a way to grab hold of that promise so that it could be a lifeline leading them through the darkness of their despair. So we set out some candles, we opened up the doors of the sanctuary, and we waited.

They came. So many of them came. We kept putting out more and more votive candles because more and more teens kept coming into the sanctuary, sitting down in the pews to say a prayer, and then coming up to the table to light a candle. There were so many candles. At the end of the night, the sanctuary wasn’t dark anymore because hundreds of votives bore witness to the promise of light and the power of love. At the end of the night, as I stood in the sanctuary surrounded by the lingering whispers of prayers and the powerful light of candles, I kept thinking, “This is what love looks like.”

“This is what love looks like.” That’s the caption that could accompany any of our Youth Group meetings. To be honest, “this is what chaos looks like” would be accurate on most Sunday nights, too. You can’t have 750 young people make their

way through your church building without a little mischief and mayhem. But more than that, there is love. There is love that meets the fears and anxieties so many of our young people carry with them every day. The fears can be overwhelming—fears of being an outsider; fears of being bullied at school; fears of being harassed online; fears of disappointing their families; fears of being betrayed by their friends; fears of failure; fears of not making the cut or getting the part or making the grade; fears that the tenuous balance of school and sports and work and friends will tip too far in one direction and cause their lives to come crashing down around them. The fears can be overwhelming, but the love is greater. I think that's what keeps them coming back. That's what drives our Youth Group members to make their way into our church and down to our Fellowship Hall. They come because they need to be together. They need to gather with peers and advisors who can dwell with them in the midst of their fears and acknowledge the messiness of their lives. They need a place where they can experience the power of community—the power of connection that overcomes their isolation. And they need a place where they can experience the promise of our faith—the promise that love is greater than any of our fears.

“This is what love looks like.” That's the caption that could accompany today's scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke. In our text, we meet up with Mary right after she receives a visit from the angel Gabriel. We can only imagine the messy mix of emotions she must have been feeling. Gabriel had revealed that she would become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit and that she would give birth to the Son of God. What an incredible honor! What an amazing blessing! But it was also a little crazy, right? Because Mary was betrothed but not yet married, so her growing belly would certainly draw attention—and questions. And it was complicated because the angel revealed all this to Mary, but then she had to share the news with her family and with Joseph. So she did what any smart woman would do. She got out of town. Mary went to see her cousin Elizabeth. Christian tradition says that Elizabeth lived in the town of Ein Karem, which was eighty miles from Mary's home in Nazareth. It would have taken Mary over a week to travel across three mountain ranges to see Elizabeth. That Mary was willing to undertake such a journey might reveal something of how she was feeling. Maybe Mary needed a place to bring this good news—this wondrously complicated news. Maybe she longed for someone who would believe her—someone who had experienced a miracle of her own and so would trust that Mary's good news was true. Maybe Mary needed a place to ask questions and find support. Maybe she just needed to be with someone who could dwell with her in the midst of her fears and acknowledge the messiness of all that was happening. Maybe she needed a place where she could experience the power of community—the power of a connection that would overcome any sense of isolation. Maybe she needed a place where she could experience the promise of her faith—the promise that God's love would be greater than any of her fears.

In this Advent season, we come together as church because we need to be together. Like Mary, we long to find people who will believe us and trust us, people who will honor the truth of our experiences and bear witness to the messiness of our lives. We need a place where we can experience the power of community—the power of connection that overcomes any sense of isolation. And we need a place where we can experience the promises of our faith—the promise that love can overcome fear, that joy can overcome grief, that peace can overcome chaos, and that hope can overcome

despair. We need the church to remind us of these promises because the world surely won't. The world is too broken. We need communities of faith that can meet us in places of despair and still remind us to reach for the light. The good news of Advent is this—the Light of the World is coming, not because our lives are perfect and our fears are gone. The Light of the World is coming because the promises of our faith are true. And that, dear church, that is what Love looks like.