

“Opening Wide Our Hearts”

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“Becoming What You Love”

A great teacher once said that the soul becomes what it loves, so pay attention to this and consider well what you love—whether things that delight or inspire, or those you feel drawn toward, for while there’s nothing wrong with any of this, consider when you love that you are becoming what you love, and so, love in a way that grows the soul and gentles the mind and graces the world. The rest will take care of itself.

—from Mark S. Burrows and Jon M. Sweeney, *Meister Eckhart’s Book of Secrets. Meditations on Letting Go and Finding True Freedom*

2 Corinthians 6. 1 – 13

Many years ago, I met a remarkable woman named Emma Epps. She was a member of Christ Congregation, a yoked UCC/ABC congregation to which I belonged and where I was ordained, in Princeton, NJ. Emma was remarkable in many ways, above all because she had spent her life as a courageous and, I would say, noble fighter for justice. She was African-American, born in 1902, and had grown up and lived her entire life in Princeton under an originally imposed and later tolerated segregation. (New Jersey was the last northern state to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment and tolerated slavery until January, 1966, some six months after the so-called “Juneteenth” in Texas in the summer of 1965.) Emma lived just blocks from the university, in the “Witherspoon” neighborhood

comprised of narrow streets with simple houses where black families—needed as service staff and manual labor—had been “allowed” to live. It was the same neighborhood where the legendary singer, athlete, and activist Paul Robeson was born and raised. Four years her senior (1898 – 1976), he had lived just down the street where Emma lived with her family.

This remarkable woman made an immense impression on me, and over the eight years of my graduate studies when we lived together in Princeton and worshiped at that church we became good friends—so much so that her character and witness inspired the naming of our first daughter, Emma, moved by her unswerving passion for justice, her profound courage in the face of intense opposition during the Civil Rights Movement in New Jersey, and her uncompromising love of others. Ms. Epps lived with a wide-open heart and a sense that positive change could happen, and she joined this congregation when it was founded—in the height of the ecumenical fervor of the 1950s, initially as a largely white UCC/ABC congregation in a still segregated town.

She was tireless in working for justice in concrete and structural terms, but always with an unswervingly positive energy. “You just got to say the right things and do the right things—and do it all with an open heart” she would often say. She knew how difficult that could be and shared with me the horrors of the violence and discrimination she had experienced at the hands of fellow citizens and the police over the earlier decades of her life.

I think of her often and cherish the memory of the years we shared together in that church. The life of witness she lived, refusing to accept the injustice and humiliations forced upon her, rings true to the courage Paul voices in our reading: “We are treated as impostors,

and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.” This was the character I came to admire and love in dear Emma Epps, and in choosing my daughter’s name I hoped for her a measure of that nobility of character and courage of heart.

I think of her, too, with the words we heard read, inspired by Meister Eckhart, that “we become what we love.” Such a simple insight, coming to us across seven centuries of time—and bearing a timeless truth. *We become what we love.* So “love in a way that grows the soul and / gentles the mind and graces the world.” That’s enough for a sermon; perhaps we ought to devote the next fifteen minutes to musing about it, quietly, in the silent depths of our heart.

But you expect me to say more than this—and I won’t disappoint you.

The apostle Paul, some thirteen centuries earlier, used a vivid metaphor to say this in a positive way: “Open wide your hearts. . .” I’d like to muse on this call as a summons to us, as Paul put it, “not to accept the grace of God in vain.”

Now, if you’d been a member of that contentious community of early Christians in the port city of Corinth, you might have been outraged to receive a letter like this. After all, it’s filled with scolding, cajoling, and reprimands—as we see in the reading appointed for today. But Paul begins by quoting the prophet Isaiah (49.8): “At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.” And he then quickly adds—as if to make sure his first readers didn’t miss it—that “*now* is the acceptable time; see, *now* is the day of salvation.” It’s as if he’s shouting: seize the day! Pay attention! Don’t let God’s gift pass you by! Live out your faith!

Good words for us to heed, in our day, as we are often enough remiss in acting boldly on the faith that calls us to live for justice and unity in the presence of our differences.

Now, first, a bit of background. What we discover in Paul's letters, which are the earliest documents we have about Christian origins (as the gospels, circulating first as oral witnesses, were only written down), is that Christianity was far less concerned with *right belief* than with *right living*. This one exemplifies that. Paul is not displeased with the Corinthians because they did not believe the right things. His displeasure and frustration is his worry that they ignored the grace of God, the gift of mercy, the call to unity. His letter is thus both a reprimand and an invitation—that they discover the depths of their faith by living it out in active witness. Because. . . *we become what we love*.

How do we “open wide our hearts”? How do you do this? And what challenges will that call us to face in times like these—with a nation gripped in discord and a political arena that seems to be locked in irreconcilable conflict?

Paul adds a phrase that I find particularly striking: “I speak to you as children,” he wrote: “Open wide your hearts!” It could be that children will lead the way, as Jesus reminded us, “for to them belongs the kingdom of God.” What did he mean by this?

I'd like to share with you the final scene from a 2017 film, “Wonder,” which you might have seen. It is an inspiring story of a boy named Auggie Pullman who had been born with Treacher Collins Syndrome—a genetic condition that causes severe deformities to the face, hands, and feet. In the film, we meet him after he had gone through dozens of surgical procedures when, after having been homeschooled for the first nine years of his life, his parents decide to enroll him in fifth grade at the local school. The film—starring

Julia Roberts as his mother, Owen Wilson as his father, and Jacob Tremblay as August Pullman—faces the difficult challenges and ultimate triumphs that his journey entailed.

The last scene is the school's graduation assembly, and we meet the headmaster who concludes each such ceremony by bestowing the "Henry Ward Beecher Medal." Who was Beecher, you might be wondering? He was a figure who rose to national prominence, a Congregational minister (1813 – 1887) who lived through the violent divisions that led to the Civil War and spoke out, often against the grain of his community, as a tireless opponent of slavery and an early advocate of women's suffrage.

Let's watch that scene. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuR5r4kfhjg>]

"Greatness lies not in being strong, but in the right using of strength. He—or she—is the greatest who carries up the most hearts by the attraction of his own." These are strong and stirring words, reminding us as Beecher did in his life of service that what matters is not just "speaking truth to power"—though surely this—but also lifting others' hearts through the openness of our own. "Opening wide our hearts," as the apostle Paul put it.

Sometimes it's that "openness" of heart that wins over others, as Auggie's courage did in the film. For, as his teacher reminded him, we are called to "be kind, for everyone is fighting a hard battle, and if you really want to see who people are, all you have to do. . . is look."

How do we look in times like these, facing as we are strong forces in our society and in the political arena that seem bent on opposing the gains of justice over the last decades? How do we engage those strident voices bent on dividing, not uniting; on tearing down, not on building up; on ridiculing, not embracing? How do we answer those whose words and actions would return our country to the structural violence that abolitionists and

suffragettes fought so hard to overcome—and often paid for with their very lives? How do we continue to tread the path they and others blazed in more recent times, devoting our lives, with them, to the cause of Civil Rights for all people, regardless of race or ethnicity or sexual orientation or gender identity? How do we join our voices to that lineage of prophetic chorus comprised of people like Henry Ward Beecher, Paul Robeson, Emma Epps, and so many others?

Their call, joining the apostle Paul's voice, urged this not out of a sense of duty alone, but because of their higher vision of a just society. For they knew that we are "not to take the grace of God in vain." And they realized that "*now* is the acceptable time; see, *now* is the day of salvation." They knew, as Ms. Epps used to say, "You just got to say the right things and do the right things—and do it all with an open heart."