

“Open Our Hearts”

Homily by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

December 24, 2021

The year was 1967. It was the year the first heart transplant took place, the first ATM was made public, and Public Broadcasting System was incorporated.

It was also the year that The Beatles recorded their world-famous album, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The album went on to achieve “Diamond” status by selling eleven million copies, far surpassing the requisite ten million sales mark. The album's top hits included “When I'm Sixty-Four” and “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.”¹

The songs, however, are not the part of the story I want to highlight tonight. The part of the story I want to focus on has to do with a stranger who Paul McCartney welcomed in.

The story goes that The Beatles were preparing to record this famous album, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, when a homeless person, claiming to be Jesus, came to the door of the studio. He asked if he could come in and watch the recording. Paul said yes and let him in.

After sharing a cup of tea together, Paul went back to recording, and the man sat silently in the back of the recording studio for the entire session, never uttering a word. He left at the end of the day, and the band never saw him again.

Later Paul was asked, of course, why he let the man in to the studio and whether he really thought the person was Jesus. To this Paul replied, “Well, he probably isn't. But if he was, I'm not going to be the one to turn him away.”²

That may sound funny, or endearing; but I ask you, and I ask all of us “What would we do?” What would we do if a homeless or ‘otherized’ person showed up at the door of our home, our office, or church, claiming to be Jesus? Would we let them in and pour them a cup of tea?

1 <https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/which-beatles-album-sold-the-most-copies-all-time.html/>

2 <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/beatles- Sgt-pepper-at-50-when-jesus-dropped-by-during-fixing-a-hole-sessions-122996/>

Well, that's what many people in Newburyport and the surrounding towns are doing. Churches including St. Paul's, the West Newbury Congregational Church, and this church are opening their doors to provide temporary housing to Afghan refugee families while permanent housing is found. And it doesn't stop there. The First Parish Food Pantry in Newbury offers food every Friday to hundreds of people of all ages. The list of such places is long and includes the YWCA, Emmaus Incorporated, The Jeanne Geiger Center, Pegasus House, Link House, Open Table, Habitat for Humanity, and many others.

This is critical work, not because it saves needy people, but because it saves us all. Welcoming the stranger, opening your hearts, requires bravery, faith, and trust.

Welcoming the stranger, opening our hearts, requires bravery to walk into the unknown, the uncomfortable, the dark, where no step is laid out in advance.

It requires faith that what we do, however seemingly small, matters. Our time matters. Our attention matters. Our love matters.

Welcoming the stranger, opening our hearts, requires trust, which means it requires community, where we lay down the burden of trying to live alone, isolated, or disconnected. Community is where we choose to claim our belonging and where we choose to work side by side, addressing the many needs of this world. Community is where we choose to celebrate every step we take toward good with others who also care about these things.

Welcoming the stranger, opening our hearts, is an orientation and way of living. It is a spiritual practice Jesus taught.

Poet Amanda Gorman in her poem “Practice Makes People” writes this:

The making of plans
When this is over,
The We can't wait,
Really our knuckles rapping
Against the future, sounding
Out what lies beneath its hull.
But tomorrow isn't revealed,

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Rather rendered, refined. Wrought.
Remember that fate isn't fought
Against. It is fought for. Again
& again..³

These are challenging times, my friends,
increasingly so with Omicron and the cold winter
months. What is happening? What will happen?

Remember that 1967 was also a difficult year.
So was the year Jesus is said to have been born,
some two thousand years ago. And yet, even in
the difficulty, the uncertainty, and the challenges
of the times, a stranger was welcomed - into a
recording studio and into a stable. There, a
stranger became a friend.

May we all welcome the stranger, open our
hearts, and invite in the miracles that await such
acts of faith.

Amen and blessed be.

³ Gorman, Amanda. *Call Us What We Carry*,
Viking, NY, 2021.