

Fourth Sunday of Advent • December 18, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 1:18-25

“Family Life: Open the Door”

Christmas is almost here – but I’m guessing that you already knew that. So what are the chances that your family gathering is going to look like a magazine photo shoot, or maybe one of those old, mid-century Norman Rockwell paintings? Images like those give glimpses of some ideal family life. They’re filled with beautiful place settings and smiling faces. The festivity almost pours out, letting you smell the aroma of table filled with seasonal treats, hear the sound of Christmas songs playing softly in the background. It’s like a scene from a Hallmark holiday movie. If that’s what your Christmas is going to be, let me know – I’d love to stop by and experience it for myself!

I doubt any of us can look forward to a perfect time together with our families this Christmas. Even Norman Rockwell didn’t expect his life to look like his artwork. He once noted, “The view of life I communicate in my pictures excludes the sordid and ugly. I paint life as I would like it to be.” Life – especially family life – isn’t going to be perfect. Loved ones die. Children make bad decisions. Parents get divorced. Family members argue about politics and finances. Opportunities for conflict just keep coming along.

Joseph and Mary certainly didn’t get off to a Norman Rockwell start. As they are making preparations for their life together – Mary likely in her mid-teens and Joseph in his early twenties – Mary drops some news on Joseph that probably hit him as “sordid and ugly:” she is pregnant. This isn’t something that Joseph would have expected from fiancée, but there it is. She’s carrying someone else’s child. How do you think Joseph felt? Betrayed? Upset? Disappointed? For all Joseph knew, Mary had been unfaithful, so now he has to choose what to do.

Joseph decides to **close the door**. That’s a natural reaction when confronted with the fact that your wife is pregnant with a mystery baby. So what if she says that this is God’s doing? You and I can read Matthew 1:18 and know that this pregnancy is the work of the Holy Spirit, but Joseph doesn’t have our advantage of having all the relevant facts. Would you have believed Mary if you were in his place?

Even so, Joseph is a good guy, a just man. He wants to do what’s right. In his well-meaning but fallible compassion and flawed human wisdom, he decides to break off their engagement. Engagement back in that culture was different from what we have today. Even though they were not living together as husband and wife, Joseph and Mary were bound by a covenant that could only be closed by death or divorce. He doesn’t want to talk about this baby; he doesn’t want to work through the issues around Mary’s surprise pregnancy. He’s going to close the door and walk away.

When conflict comes up in family life, sometimes we’ll do the same thing. Rather than address the problem that’s right there disrupting our life together, we’ll avoid it – maybe in the false hope that if we ignore it and don’t do anything about it, it’ll magically go away on its own. Similarly, we might just withdraw and seek separation, holding back from each other instead of engaging in conversations and listening to one another so as to better understand whatever caused the conflict in the first place. We close the door.

But when conflict comes along, another option is to **slam the door**. Gladly, Joseph didn’t choose to take that route. The penalty for adultery could go as far as stoning someone to death (Deut. 22:13-21). But Joseph doesn’t want to cause Mary further pain or embarrassment. He simply wants to move on without her. It’s an example of why Matthew 1:19 calls Joseph a righteous man.

You and I? We’re not always as righteous. Especially when it comes to conflict in our family life, we gladly slam the door – figuratively and literally. We yell. We throw tantrums and verbal grenades. We lash out or retaliate; so that the person who has hurt us might feel our pain, too. We shut down discussion, refusing to recognize each other as valued children of the same heavenly Father. The door slams shut.

In times of conflict and distress, we could choose to **lock the door**. When you’re burned out from what’s come before or afraid of what might come next, locking the door seems to make sense. We seek out defensive or proactive isolation in order to shut off those issues that are so sensitive, so intense, or so volatile that we just can’t deal with them – maybe ever again. We lock the door and throw away the key. We live in a broken world filled with broken people. What else could we hope to do?

Open the door. That's God's better option for us. Hear how it played out in Joseph's situation: "*But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'*" (Matt. 1:20-21) God's messenger comes to Joseph with the good news that his fiancée was not lying to him, that this mystery baby is, in fact, divine. And Joseph, trusting in God's revealed plan, opens the door to life with Mary and her unborn son as family. He accepted them, loved them, and cared for them.

Joseph needed help with family life. We do, too. We close doors. We slam doors. We lock doors. Not so with God. God opens the door for us. **He engages us with His love.** "*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.'*" (Matt. 1:22-23) Those names given to Mary's baby point to God's love: Jesus means "Yahweh is salvation," and Immanuel means "God with us." God is with us, even coming to be a human being to save our bodies and souls from sin. Jesus has come to bring God's love for you and for your family – so that you may live in that love.

Experience tells us that opening the door doesn't come naturally for us. But God doesn't leave us to make do with the limited abilities our broken nature. As you and I follow Jesus, our Immanuel, through life, God the Holy Spirit gives us the option and the ability to open the door and engage each other with love, even in the midst of pain and conflict in family life. He gives us the power to look at our parents and our children, our spouses and our siblings, and open the door.

In this Advent season of preparation – not getting ready for Christmas but getting ready for Jesus' return – open the door in family life. Be aware of those natural reactions we have when conflict comes: closing, slamming, or locking the door. Bring your needs to our Lord in prayer, asking Him to open the door so that you might engage your family with His love. Trust that Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-us, and that he is here for you now by the working of the Holy Spirit. And he's here for your family, too.

As these days of Advent draw to a close, let's get ready. Christmas is almost here. Open the door, and celebrate God's gift of Jesus, our Immanuel!

Amen.