

I watched the Walmart greeter a long time one Saturday afternoon. I remember sitting on the bench just inside the front doors of the Calgary Walmart where my mom used to shop and watched. The retired woman with the dyed red hair smiled, and greeted people with a shopping cart, offered directions to get portable strollers for dads with tots and held the doors open for shoppers laden with shopping bags.

I watched as people responded. Some shoppers didn't even notice the friendly hello; others were quite rude in their response. Some shoppers were equally friendly back glad of the directions to the paint department. On this particular day, children were the most receptive. There seemed to be an instant chemistry between the Walmart greeter and the children she encountered. She didn't seem to take any more time with them. Some people shook hands. One person shared a joke with the greeter, another gave the greeter a hug...they must have been related.

I wondered at Walmart's 30 year business plan of hiring post retirement seniors to welcome hurried shoppers to the store – each one carrying the promise of a return on investment. What was the greeter's value added to the bottom line? How did they help shoppers find the holy grail of rolled back prices? What's it like now that they aren't there in the same way? Are we spending less? Have we noticed? Did these gatekeepers to low prices make the shopping experience more pleasant?

In group dynamics, people take on different roles, quite by accident. As a group begins to meet regularly and form patterns of behaviour, in order to preserve and maintain the orderly functioning of a group, different unconscious maintenance roles emerge: harmonizer, gatekeeper, consensus tester, encourager, and compromiser. As I think about the Walmart greeter this morning, I'm thinking about the role of the Gatekeeper: the one person in the group who keeps open the channels for honest communication and makes suggestion that encourage participation. A gatekeeper might notice, for instance, that one person is reluctant to speak on a particular topic. The gatekeeper might stop the current flow of conversation to say to the quiet one something like: "Esther, I haven't heard you express your opinion on this matter."

So the gate keeper is the one who fosters and encourages access to that which we don't have access – low prices, participation in a group meeting, a place to have a baby.

It's interesting how over the years the role of the innkeeper has emerged into the Christmas story. In movies, in books, in annual Christmas pageants, the role of a cantankerous old codger barring access to an empty hotel room has emerged as a viable variation on the two simple verses Marion read this morning. "While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn"

I memorized this story in Grade two because I had to recite it in our school Christmas assembly. See, there's no innkeeper. There isn't even an inn like the Best Western we like to imagine. The New International Version of this same story actually gets it more right. "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them." Still no inn keeper, but do you notice, there is no inn either. There's a guest room.

I did a little word study this week, and discovered that in the original Greek of this story, Luke uses the word "kataluma" which means guest room or upper room. This is the same word later in his Gospel when he describes the last supper as having been held in a guest room or upper room. Of all the gospel writer's, Luke is absolutely intentional about every word he uses. And so in the 10th chapter, Luke uses the word we might normally associate with a rooming house, or hostel, when he records Jesus parable of the good Samaritan. This is no accident. Luke knows what he's writing. The inn where the beaten man was to be cared for after the Samaritan left him is not the same "inn" from which Mary and Joseph were turned away.

You know what this might mean? Joseph and Mary have been travelling to Joseph's place of ancestry. It's quite possible he has extended family in this town. Mary is nine months pregnant and unmarried. It's quite possible that the "innkeeper" was a member of Joseph's family unwilling to let this blasphemous unwed mother give birth in the guest room. She can do that with the animals. It could also mean that the same family was quite willing to have Mary and Joseph stay with them. They were family. They just didn't have room in the guest room, for all the guests and a baby to be born, which could mean there was no innkeeper at all.

All of this is pure conjecture of course, but we need to pay attention to the fact that the inn was not a hotel, it was the guest room in a typical family home. The manger would have been found in the animals quarters on the main floor of this same family home...this was not a barn in the back section of a farmer's field. At least according to Luke's telling of this story.

I love the reading by Thomas Merton, an American Trappist Monk who specialized in comparative religions, social justice and spiritual awakening. Comparing the mythic sense of a cold, busy, heartless Bethlehem in the Christmas story to the sometimes cold and heartless reality of our time, Merton reflects on the doctrine of the end times.

He writes ““We live in the time of no room, which is the time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration.

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited.”

Whether it’s a member of the family, a heartless hotel operator, or a Walmart Greeter, Merton puts the role of Innkeeper/gatekeeper squarely in our laps. The hymn writer concurs:

“Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.”

The question of whether we have room for the dear Christ to enter rises within us. We control completely Christ’s birthplace within us. Because of who God is and how we are made, we get to decide whether the cost to let in light, love, compassion, justice, healing, forgiveness is simply too high. Giving up our needing to be right, our grievances, our painful memories, old beliefs, too much busy-ness, our over-commitments may well be too high a price to pay for the transformation that comes with Christ’s birth within us. Perhaps we simply don’t know how to live into our own salvation. But that’s what Merton is on about. The grace of Christmas, birthed in the light of the world is constantly available to us. We’re the ones who control whether we let it in.

I think the cantankerous version of the innkeeper that storytellers have concocted is a great addition. How often are we that innkeeper? And truly, I think his was nothing but an honest response: “No I have no room.” If Christmas is about anything, it’s about being as honest as the innkeeper about the place of grace being born in our lives this year. In the middle of the Advent season, in the heart of all the Christmas celebrations, do we have room for Christ to be born within us? What would it look like if we made room?

I’m certain our lives would not end, they would begin again. Amen.