

2022 05 15 – CODA

Acts 16:9-15 (The Inclusive Bible)

Each year, during Lent, I choose five of the movies nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards and use them as the basis for a sermon series. This year, for the first time, the picture that ended up winning the Oscar was not included in my list. That film is, of course, CODA. I'm thrilled that some of you were able to watch CODA here at the church on Friday afternoon and I'm wondering who else has been able to see it.

CODA is an acronym that stands for Child Of Deaf Adults. The movie is about a teenage girl named Ruby who is in her final year of high school. She is the hearing child of two Deaf parents and has an older brother who is also Deaf. Every morning, before school, she joins her father and brother on the family boat and they go fishing off the coast of Massachusetts. Fishing is the family business.

Ruby is fluent in both American Sign Language (or ASL) and English. She lives in a small town where hers is the only deaf family. She has spent her life interpreting for her parents at the local stores, with the fish merchants and even accompanying them to their medical appointments. When her family decides to start a co-op with other local fishermen, Ruby's ability to interpret becomes even more vital.

But Ruby has her own interests. She goes to the local high school, has her own hearing friends and recently has decided to join the school choir. Ruby has always loved to sing, but she has no idea whether she is any good at it.

Obviously, her parents have not been able to give her any encouragement. In fact, when she tells her mother about her new interest, her mother assumes it is just the whim of a rebellious teenager and signs, “If I was blind would you take up painting?”

But Ruby soon finds out that she has a true talent. With the encouragement of her music teacher she even starts preparing an audition for a prestigious college of music in nearby Boston. Ruby finds herself caught between the needs of her family and the possibility of further study and maybe even a career in music.

Both the movie and today’s scripture reading begin on the ocean. The opening scene in CODA is on a fishing boat in the Atlantic Ocean and our reading from the Acts of the Apostles begins with Paul and his companions travelling by boat on the Aegean Sea. Paul had a vision that told him to travel across the water from Troas to Philippi in the district of Macedonia.

While Paul and his companions are in Philippi, their day of rest, the Sabbath, comes around and they decide to leave the walled city and go to the shore of a nearby river. There they find a gathering of women and Paul begins to preach to them. Paul is always looking for opportunities to talk about Jesus and his good news of God’s love.

Among the group is a woman named Lydia. The scripture tells us that God opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. Lydia was so moved by his words that she and her entire household were baptized and she then offered her home to Paul and his companions. We don't know what it was that moved her to become a follower of Jesus, but we do know that her transformation began with a heart that was opened by God, a heart that was opened by the Essence of Love.

That's really what worship is about isn't it? It's about opening our hearts, listening for the truth of God in our lives and then having the courage to act on it. In our scripture reading today, Lydia took the first steps on her path of truth and, in the movie, Ruby is also beginning to open her heart to the truth in her life.

Opening our hearts to Love—God's love or the love another person, or even the love of self—is scary. It can lead to pain and heartache. But it can also lead to joy and fulfillment. In our movie, Ruby loves her family deeply and is torn between their needs and the joy she has found in singing. In fact, the song that she chooses for her audition at the music college is *Both Sides Now* by Joni Mitchell. It is a song about the challenges of love and life and includes the words:

I've looked at love from both sides now
From give and take and still somehow
It's love's illusions I recall.
I really don't know love at all.

I challenge everyone listening today and especially those of you who are graduating this year to allow your heart to be opened by the power of Love so that you may discover your own true path.

This movie is about opening our hearts to the truth in our own lives and it's also about opening our hearts to the truth in the lives of those who are deaf or hard of hearing. In this story we get to experience the intimate lives of a Deaf family. We experience with them the prejudice that they deal with and the difficulties that they face in day-to-day living. But we also experience their humanity, their humour, and the warmth of their family circle.

Allowing our hearts to be opened by God means that we also open our lives to include the amazing diversity of God's creation. It means asking ourselves about the barriers that exist in our community and particularly in our faith community for those who are deaf or hard of hearing. It means challenging ourselves to take the next step to be truly welcoming and affirming.

The choir is now going to sing today's anthem and Karen Bender will be joining them. Karen works with a woman in our community who is both deaf and blind. To communicate they use a language called Signing Exact English (SEE). When someone is both deaf and blind you have to use a language that has a sign for every word and even for past tenses and prefixes. SEE is a little slower and more cumbersome than ASL but it allows for exact communication. Karen is going to sign the words of the anthem as the choir is singing. Karen, we thank you for sharing your gifts and skills with us today.