

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of *our* hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, *our* strength and *our* Redeemer. *Amen.*

This has been a week of real ups and downs here at St. Francis, even more so than usual. Preparations for Christmas, two memorial services, five service bulletins, caroling to our homebound members, and a broken copier have been expressed in a wide range of emotions and made a full schedule even fuller. I've always believed that what really needs to be done—things that really matter—will get done. Just keep on keeping on, one day, one thing at a time.

At 10:15 on Friday night, the phone rang at the rectory. Dick had just gone to bed and I was sitting at my laptop seeking inspiration for a couple of Christmas sermons. Who could be calling at that late hour? It sounds a bit like the beginning of the Night Before Christmas, doesn't it?

The voice on the other end of the phone identified himself as the pastor of a local Baptist church. A couple in his church wants to be married at St. Francis, it seems. "Not in the church itself, but out there where there's an awning," the pastor said. "Would that be a problem?"

"I don't know where you mean," I replied. "You know," the man said. "Out there on the covered walkway." Ah, the Cloister Walk. "Well, our policy at St. Francis is that only members or their families may be married here at our church and it must be an Episcopal service, officiated by an Episcopal priest." "Oh, I see," the man said. But I was fairly sure he didn't see. Why on earth would he be calling about this after ten o'clock at night right before one of the two biggest and most important days of the church year?

"Listen, do you know what time it is," I asked. "Do you realize it's after 10:00 at night? Couldn't this have waited until next week or at least until tomorrow? They don't want to be married tomorrow, do they?"

"Yes, actually they do," the man replied. Astonished, I said "Well, we also require that the couple go through several sessions of pre-marital consultation with me or someone else before the marriage takes place. It just won't be possible." The man said okay and hung up.

I sat there for a while enjoying some self-righteous indignation at the absurdity of the whole thing and the nerve of that minister and the couple he represented. Why did they wait until the day before? Didn't he know it was the eve of Christmas Eve? St. Francis isn't a wedding chapel, after all. We've had a lot going on here this week and more still ahead. How about some respect for that? I've got sermons to write, gifts to wrap, food to cook. Good grief. What was that man thinking? I don't have time for this. There is no room for this in my schedule! I am already over-booked!

Then yesterday morning I woke up thinking about Mary and Joseph on the night the holy child was born. Imagine Mary: young, scared, away from home, about to undergo the biggest moment of her life. And Joseph, presumably a young man, feeling who knows what about everything that's happened to him in the past few months, faced with a

potential disaster if he can't find a place for Mary to rest and maybe to give birth to the baby. They go to inn after inn after inn. But everything is booked solid. There is no room for them anywhere, it seems.

In Spain and in other Spanish-speaking countries and communities, the ritual of Las Posadas is a traditional part of the Christmas celebration. Re-enacting the night of Christ's birth, neighborhood pilgrims go from home to home seeking shelter for the evening. Among them is a couple playing the parts of Joseph and Mary. Joseph is the first to approach the house, knock on the door, and say in a loud voice, "In the name of God, we ask those who dwell here, give to some travelers lodging this evening." From inside, a chorus of voices responds, "This is not an inn; move on—I cannot open lest you be a scoundrel." The procession moves on from one home to the next—that is from one inn to another—repeating the same exchange. At each place, the response from inside grows louder and angrier and the young couple grows more and more weary as they seek a place of rest. But there is no room in the inn, even after Joseph reveals his wife's true identity and the identity of the child to be born.

The scene is re-enacted for eight days with the same results—no room in the inn! Then finally, on the ninth day, the heart of an innkeeper is opened by Joseph's pleadings and he offers them a stable, the only place he has left. It becomes the place of the Savior's birth, and everyone gathered celebrates the blessings that found a place to grow in the innkeeper's generosity and hospitality.

I wonder about all those other innkeepers, the ones who refused to open the door or quickly shut it in the faces of the young couple who simply wanted a place to rest and bring their child into the world. At its least, hospitality involves awareness and respect for the needs of others, and at its best, a willingness to respond to those needs. While I won't be seeking change for St. Francis' wedding policy, I *am* reminded that the role of the church, and all of us who are part of it—including me!—is to extend to others the same hospitality and generous spirit that we would extend to the holy child. Sometimes that means putting aside our own fears, our own weariness, our own busy schedules for the sake of others. We will never know who is waiting on the other side of the closed and locked door unless we let them in!

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth!
Amen.