

Joseph, the Mentor
Matthew 13:54-56
December 3, 2017 – First Sunday of Advent

Most of you know that you can find most anything on the Internet. I need to tell you that I get e-mail almost daily about sermon resources. Some offer fully written sermons that I could be preaching without needing to spend several hours every week in preparation. Others offer thematic ideas, outlines, examples, and the like; and, I need to say that I have never taken advantage of these “offers.” I generally preach from the lectionary, that ecumenical plan of weekly scriptures. I find a certain spiritual connectedness in knowing that we, in this congregation join with Christians around the world in studying the same scriptures on the same Sundays; and I am often amazed at how well the lectionary fits with current events or the current church situation. That having been said, I am not a slave to the lectionary. I did, for instance, deviate from the lectionary when preaching our five part sermon series on “Our Guiding Principles” a few months back. I say all of this, in a way of say that this Advent, I am going to deviate from the lectionary. Not only that, but I’m also basing my sermons on a four week study by Adam Hamilton entitled *Faithful: Christmas Through the Eyes of Joseph*. I recently read Hamilton’s book and I found it enlightening, meaningful, and provocative. I’m not going to reiterate the study from the pulpit; but I am going to borrow Hamilton’s theme and outline as this Advent we consider Joseph as a model for faithfulness. I hope you will join me on our journey through advent with Joseph, the earthly, adopted father of Jesus.

I was first attracted to Hamilton’s study when I received a flier in the mail. My academic curiosity was peaked. I thought, “Joseph, we know almost nothing about Joseph. How can someone do a four week study on this guy?” What the Bible tells us about Joseph is the little bit that is reported in the Christmas narratives in Matthew and Luke; and Luke’s story of Jesus getting lost in Jerusalem and his parents finding him in the temple when Jesus was twelve. After that, Joseph simply disappears from the scene. Still, as Hamilton points out, we can infer a great deal about Joseph by what we know of Jesus; and there is a considerable amount of extra-canonical material, “stuff” not in the bible about Joseph which, while it might not be totally accurate, still probably has some roots in fact.

So I will start our journey by noting that The Gospel of Matthew, and thus the New Testament begins with a genealogy. To most people, reading the first seventeen verses of Matthew is a royal bore. It’s simply a list of names. I need to say, as an amateur genealogist, I do sometimes find a list of names interesting; but, as a student of the Bible, I tell you this list of names is hugely important. You see, this list of names begins with

Abraham, progresses through fourteen generations to King David, than through another fourteen generations to the Babylonian Exile, and finally through another fourteen generations to “the Messiah,” and it links “the Messiah” to his heritage and to the Old Testament promise that the Messiah would be born from the lineage of David. This genealogy links Jesus to David through Joseph, the husband of his mother, Mary. Jewish tradition defines a Jew as one who is born of a Jewish mother, and there is no doubt that Mary was a good Jewish mother. Still it’s Joseph that links Jesus to his Jewish roots, and his Davidic lineage.

So what do we know about this Jewish couple, Joseph and Mary. We can be almost certain that Mary was a young teenager. It was common in the first century for girls to be married shortly after passing through puberty, and starting a family soon thereafter. There is a tradition, dating from the mid second century that says Joseph was an elderly widower when he took Mary for his wife, and indeed that is much Christian art that portrays Joseph as such. However, many Christians, and most biblical scholars reject this notion. Knowing the history and the culture of the time, it seems far more likely that Joseph was not a lot older than Mary – maybe in his mid to late teens when he took her as his wife.

The Gospels describe Joseph as a *tekton*, a word we usually translate as carpenter. It’s important to note that Greek also has a word *architekton*, from which we get the word “architect.” An *architekton* was a master builder; but Joseph was simply a *tekton* – someone who worked with wood. Wood was in short supply in the ancient near east. Houses were built of mud and stone. Still, the *tekton* would have built doors and shutters, and furniture. The *tekton* would probably also have built farm impliments. (Remember Jesus telling his disciples: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”(Matt 11:28-30)) Indeed, Jesus probably had firsthand experience shaping yokes out of beams of wood.

Joseph would have learned his trade from his father, and was not yet a master builder – still only an apprentice, a *tekton* when he married Mary. And soon after marrying Mary, he and his bride, and their young son, a son whom Joseph willingly “adopted” (and I’ll say more about that next week) move into their own home, with their own carpenter’s shop on the first floor, and the family living space either in the back or upstairs. And as soon as Jesus was old enough to pick up scraps of wood or sweep up the shavings, we can assume that he went to work with Joseph in the shop.

So our first point, which I confess I have never thought about before... God not only chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, God also chose Joseph to be his earthly father. God did not choose a priest like he did in the case of Zechariah and John the Baptist. God did not choose a king, like he did in the case of David and Solomon. No, God chose a humble

carpenter – a mere *tekton* to raise God’s son. Throughout the Bible, we have cases of God choosing unlikely candidates to further the kingdom of God; and Joseph is no exception. And still, we can only assume that Joseph had a strong faith, a personal character, and a loving soul suitable for the task.

We can also assume that Joseph had a major influence on Jesus. Jesus probably spent almost every waking hour working beside Joseph from the time he was a young child until Joseph died. Today’s fathers have a huge influence on their children, many have a positive influence and unfortunately many have a negative influence.

I can’t claim to have been extremely close to my father. I was a musician; he was not. He was an athlete; I was not. Our likes and dislikes were very different; and we did not spend a lot of time together. But Dad was extremely important. I can’t count the number of concerts my father sat through, when he could not have told a G sharp from an E flat; but he was there, because his boy was playing. I can remember as a teenager, when I was leaving for a date and my father would slip me a twenty dollar bill without my mother knowing, and tell me – have a good time. (Back then twenty dollars would pay for a movie and a nice meal for both my date and myself.)

But more importantly, I remember the advice. My father would tell me, “Always do the best you can do; and, if you’re doing the best you can do, nobody has the right to ask you to do better.” There are many other things I learned from my father; but I won’t go into all of them here.

I remember serving as a chaplain intern at a local hospital while I was in seminary. I began visiting a patient who had a rare blood condition that kept her bouncing in and out of the hospital. As I visited, I learned that her father died when she was three. Her mother had several other partners that bounced in and out of her life through her early years. She married a man who was a “good husband” until alcohol got the best of him, then he also failed her. As I ministered to this lady, my supervisor coached me on how important fathers are in shaping the lives of young girls. This lady never had a father that she could trust to be there, and she literally had “bad blood.”

Sadly, we live in a time when 26 percent of millennials say they have poor or below-average relationships with their fathers. Indeed, many children experience fathers who are either abusive or not at all present in their lives.

Some of you know that there is a movement in the church that seeks to eliminate masculine language for God. Some would prefer not to refer to God as “He” and they speak of a Father and Mother God. Personally, I find a lot of meaning in seeing a mothering image in the divine; but I also recognize that sadly, for some people, the fatherly image is not a positive one. In fact, there has been research that suggests that a high percentage of atheists have had difficult relationships with their fathers.

Now, we can't solve all the domestic problems here; but I do suggest that most of us have had some man in our lives that had a major positive effect on us. Maybe our father, or maybe a teacher or a Sunday School teacher, or a scout leader, or a youth leader, or a relative, or a neighbor, or some other mentor. Think about that person, as I suggest – that was Joseph for Jesus – the person that would instill trust, values, good judgment, the person that would teach the Jewish faith. Now, yes, I fully believe that the Holy Spirit had a huge role in this. Yes, I believe that Jesus was inspired by the Holy Spirit, that Jesus was infused with the Holy Spirit, that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit as the divine Son of God. I'm also suggesting that maybe that same Holy Spirit used Joseph to do a goodly amount of that inspiration, infusion, and leading. I ask, is it possible that, when Jesus referred to God as *abba*, "Daddy," he was led by the image of his earthly father.

And so I close, by asking all the men and maybe also the women but particularly the men, What kind of mentor are you? To whom are you a mentor? Are you called to be a Joseph to a child, a relative, a student, the kid next door, the person you're sitting next to right now? Mary was a special lady. Jesus was special beyond description. But Joseph was just a plain ordinary, albeit faithful *tekton* whom God called to raise his Son? To what is God calling you?

Let us pray. . .

Most holy Lord,
Lead us and guide us,
that we may lead others
in the faith, the hope, and the love of Christ.
Amen.

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