

Joseph, the Righteous Man
Matthew 1:18-19
December 10, 2017 – Second Sunday of Advent

Today, we come to the second in our four-part series on Joseph, the earthly father or I might call him the adopted father of Jesus. You may remember, last week we discussed Joseph, the simple carpenter, the *tekton*, as a person who undoubtedly had a huge influence on Jesus, the Son of God. Today, we're going to take a step back and consider Joseph, the young man engaged to Mary.

Let us begin by considering what the word "engaged" meant in the first century. Frequently, a match was made between a boy and girl when they were still young children. This was generally an informal agreement between the parents, sometimes with the help of a matchmaker. Then, years later, at the time when the girl entered puberty, the engagement became more formal. An agreement between the parents was signed, and a dowry or "bride price" was paid by the father of the groom to the father of the bride. This was usually a large sum of money, and it was not simply a gift. It was more like collateral. If something happened in the marriage – death, divorce, etc., the "bride price" would be available for the bride and her family to "fall back on." Frequently, the groom would also give a large sum of money to the bride, a symbol of his love and fidelity. Think of that as a nice diamond engagement ring given to a bride today. This formalizing of the engagement would happen several months or even a couple years before the actual marriage ceremony; and it's at this point that our story of Jesus begins.

Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they were married, she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Do you expect Joseph to believe that his bride was a pregnant virgin? What's a man to do? What is Joseph to do when he discovers his fiancée is pregnant, and he knows that he is not the father? The Jewish law is very clear as to what should happen in this circumstance. Even though they were not yet formally married, Mary was formally and legally engaged to Joseph. Thus, she was guilty of adultery. By the law, Joseph should have dragged her before the elders at the city gate and formally accused her. At that point, Mary's family would have been required to restore all the money paid by Joseph's family, both Mary and her family would have been publically and permanently humiliated, and Mary would have been stoned to death. That's the Jewish law of the first century.

But then comes the key verse in today's lesson -- Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. The Bible does not give any details in Joseph's plan. Would Mary's family repay any funds? Would the family slip away to another town? What would happen to Mary, this unwed mother? We simply don't know. We don't

even know if Joseph had gotten that far in his thinking before the angel appear to him in a dream, and we'll hear about that next week. The point is that Joseph did not want to disgrace Mary -- Let's just break this whole thing off quietly, and we'll go our separate ways.

While I was studying this lesson, a true story came to my mind. While working on my Master of Arts degree, I took a class in medical ethics; and there was a physician in the class who told this story. Without names, without violating any confidence, he told of a couple who came to him for consultation. The couple had recently given birth to a baby that was diagnosed with Spina Bifida, a genetic birth defect in the formation of the spine, sometimes mild and sometimes severe. The couple wanted to have more children, and so they contacted their physician to ask, if they had more children, what were the chances that future children would be born with Spina Bifida. The doctor did a genetic test on both the mother and the father; and, when the results were in, he phoned the mother. He told her, "I have good news and bad news. The good news: you and your husband have absolutely zero chance of having another child with Spina Bifida. The bad news, your baby that now has Spina Bifida is not your husband's child." The doctor went on to ask, "Do you want to explain this to your husband or should I?", and the woman replied, "I will tell him."

It turns out that nine months before the child was born, the couple had an argument and had separated for a brief period of time. During that time the woman made contact with a former boyfriend, and had what we might call "a one night stand." Very soon after, the couple resolved their differences, got back together; and were now happily married.

Why do I tell this story? Because, when the woman told her husband the results of their blood test, her husband replied, "I love you. You are my wife; and that child will be my baby," and he went on to raise the baby as his own. I never met that man. I don't even know his name. But I tell you, that is a righteous man.

Joseph was a righteous man. Joseph was a common man, a simple carpenter, but, based on that one simple verse, "being unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, he planned to dismiss her quietly," I find in Joseph a kind man, a gentle man, a caring man, a loving man. That was the man whom God chose to raise his Son.

Last week, we spoke about the genealogy that begins the Gospel of Matthew. I stated that, to many people it's simply a list of names; but I emphasized the importance of that list of names tying Jesus all the way back to Abraham through his earthly father Joseph. There is something else special in that list of names. In a heavily patriarchal society, there are four women listed in the genealogy; and they are not the women you might expect -- not Sarah or Rebekah or Rachel, one of the matriarchs, not Merriam, Moses' sister, or Hannah, the mother of Samuel. No, the four women that are listed are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and

Bathsheba (although Bathsheba is not named, only referred to as the wife of Uriah). Why did Matthew list these women in his genealogy? These women knew pain, brokenness and hardship. Tamar was forced to play the prostitute in order to have children after her husband died. Rehab was a prostitute who risked her life to help the Israelites settle the promised land. Ruth was a foreigner, a Moabite who had lost her husband and traveled on faith to a foreign land ultimately to marry an older man and become the great grandmother of King David. And Bathsheba was the victim of David advances and subsequent murder of her husband Uriah. But for all of their hardship, all of their struggles, God used these unlikely women as a part of God's redemptive work in the world. They along with Joseph are examples of the people that God chooses to do God's work – sometimes they are the least and the lost; and sometimes they are simple carpenters; and that's the way God works.

Some of you know that I like to look at the early church for an example of Christian faithfulness. There were leaders in the early church – Peter and Paul, Timothy and Titus, and women like Priscilla and Lydia; but the leaders whom we name did not work alone. The Church of Jesus Christ is the church it is today because of the thousands of unnamed saints, some of whom risked fame and fortune, most of whom risked their very lives simply to spread the Good News of God's amazing love.

And that's our call today, not to be a Peter or Paul or Timothy or Titus or a Priscilla or Lydia; but maybe, maybe to follow the example of Joseph, a simple carpenter, a loving, caring individual, a righteous man whom God called to raise God's Son.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,
Let us follow the example of Joseph.
While we may never be a Peter or a Paul,
help us to answer your call,
to follow where you lead,
that we too can spread the Good News
of your Amazing Love,
by our thoughts, our deeds, and our actions.
This we pray in your holy name.
Amen.

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