

JOSEPH: A RIGHTEOUS MAN

Matthew 1:18-25

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
December 23, 2007*

Presbyterian elder Ann Weems, in her book *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, has a poem entitled "Getting to the Front of the Stable." The poem begins like this:

*Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?
Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,
and told him to stand in the back of the crèche,
background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?*

*God-chosen, this man Joseph was faithful
in spite of the gossip in Nazareth,
in spite of the danger from Herod.*

*This man, Joseph, listened to angels
and it was he who named the Child
Emmanuel.*

*Is this a man to be stuck for centuries
in the back of the stable?*

Is Joseph a man to be ignored or discounted as peripheral to the Christmas story? Will he forever have only a minor role in the Christmas pageant? I invite you to join with me this morning in looking more closely at this man Joseph as we seek to answer those questions.

Actually, we don't know a whole lot about Joseph. What little we do know, we know from the gospels. Mark, however, the first gospel to be written, does not mention Joseph at all. John, the last gospel to be written, says only that Jesus was the son of Joseph from Nazareth.

Luke says a bit more. He says that at the time of the census Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem because he was descended from King David. Luke also tells us that Joseph was engaged to Mary, a virgin, who was expecting a child. And when the child was born and the shepherds came to see him, Joseph is mentioned as being with Mary and the baby.

In Luke's genealogy of Jesus, Joseph is listed as the father, "as was thought," of Jesus. Luke also tells us that Jesus' parents---his mother and father---took the baby Jesus to be presented in the temple in Jerusalem and again took him to the temple when he was 12 years old. Luke mentions that Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem every year for the festival of Passover, indicating that Joseph was a religious man. And finally Luke tells us that the people in Nazareth said about Jesus, "Is this not Joseph's son?"

It is in Matthew, however, that we learn the most about Joseph. In the second chapter of Matthew we have an extended account of Joseph's important role in protecting Mary and the baby Jesus from Herod, including the flight into Egypt for safety. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus identifies Joseph as the husband of Mary. In our lesson for today, from chapter 1, Joseph is described both as being engaged to Mary and as being her husband.

Now if we're going to understand Mary and Joseph's situation, we need to know the steps leading to marriage in the first-century Jewish culture. There were three steps. First was the engagement, when a marriage partner was selected, usually by the families.

The second step was the betrothal, which lasted about a year and was legally binding. It was almost like marriage, except there was no sexual intimacy allowed. The betrothal could be broken only by death or divorce. The period of betrothal required absolute faithfulness on the part of the woman. If she was unfaithful, it was considered adultery; and she could be put to death. What was more likely was that her husband-to-be would divorce her; certainly he would not marry her.

The third step leading to marriage was the wedding, after which the couple actually began living together.

Joseph and Mary were in the second stage, that of betrothal, when she discovered that she was pregnant. From what both Matthew and Luke tell us, Joseph and Mary together had observed the strict requirement of sexual abstinence during their betrothal, so Joseph knew that he was not the father of this baby. Therefore, Joseph reasoned, Mary must have been unfaithful. Joseph knew that the Jewish law was harsh and cruel to the woman in a situation like this, demanding that her deed be exposed publicly, which would not only humiliate her but also destroy her reputation for life.

What was Joseph to do? It must have been an agonizing decision for him. Even in those days of arranged marriages, there was likely to have been some degree of affection and tenderness between Joseph and Mary. She was just a young teenager, and if he exposed her publicly, her whole life would be ruined. On the other hand, it seemed obvious that she had broken her vows and had been unfaithful to him. Did he not have every right to demand retribution? We don't know how long Joseph agonized over the decision he had to make, but we can imagine that it was a very difficult decision.

He finally decided that he was not willing to expose Mary to public disgrace, so he would divorce her quietly and privately. Matthew tells us that Joseph made this decision because he was a righteous man. A righteous man, in Jewish terms, would be someone who tried to do what was right, who tried to live by the Jewish law, and tried to do it with love and compassion.

In this case, Joseph knew what was right--to divorce Mary because he thought she had been unfaithful--but he wanted to do it as lovingly and compassionately as he could. So he decided not to drag her through the streets publicly or force her to wear a scarlet letter identifying her sin for all the world to see. He would divorce her, as the law stipulated, but he would do it quietly, because he was a righteous man.

But then, the angel appeared to him in a dream, and Joseph learned about real righteousness. In his dream, the angel said to him, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Now Joseph was in a real dilemma. He had made up his mind based on what he knew to be right according to the law. As a righteous man, he had decided to follow the Jewish law, but with compassion. But now the angel was telling him to disregard the law altogether. What was Joseph to do?

- Should he do what he had thought was right, and what the law instructed him to do, and divorce Mary? Or should he do as the angel had instructed him and take Mary as his wife?
- Should he follow the prescribed code of ethics because it was the law set forth in Scripture? Or should he be open to the new information from God’s messenger that changed the whole picture?
- Should he follow the letter of the law, or the spirit of the law?
- What did it mean to be righteous and to do what was right?
- What was right in this situation?

These were the tough questions that Joseph had to wrestle with.

Finally he made his decision. Matthew tells us that “when Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife.” Joseph had learned from the angel a new meaning of righteousness. He learned that doing the right thing does not necessarily mean following the law in every instance or automatically applying set rules to every situation. He learned that being righteous involves being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit and doing what the Spirit instructs.

In the words of Tom Long, a Presbyterian minister and seminary professor of preaching, “Joseph moves from bound righteousness to responsive righteousness”---that is, from being bound to a set of rules to being responsive to new information and the needs of each situation. (From Tom Long’s unpublished lecture delivered at Pittsburgh Seminary Summer School of Religion, 1994.)

Tom Long also says that Joseph is a paradigm or model of what Matthew hopes the reader will become by the end of reading this gospel. In other words, Matthew hopes that the reader, or hearer, of this gospel will change as Joseph changed, that the reader will become open and obedient to the Holy Spirit, rather than being bound to the law or a set of rules.

Now how does this story from 2000 years ago speak to us? Well, I think this story speaks directly to us with regard to an issue that we are dealing with in our denomination. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been struggling for 30 years with the question of whether practicing gays and lesbians should be ordained as ministers, elders, and deacons. People on both sides agree that we need to do what is right. But how do we decide what is right? How do we know what we should do?

- Do we just automatically appeal to a precedent, or to established rules, or to Scripture, assuming that we already know what the right thing is to do? Or do we prayerfully explore what the Holy Spirit might be saying to us in each new situation?

- Are we closed-minded, thinking we already know the answers, or are we open to the leading of the Spirit?

If Joseph had closed his mind to the leading of the Spirit, think what might have happened. He would have divorced Mary, and Jesus would have been raised as an illegitimate child in a single-parent home with a divorced mother whose reputation was certainly less than saintly.

Moreover, if Joseph had divorced Mary and consequently had not adopted the baby Jesus as his own son, Jesus would not have been a descendant of King David, since it is through Joseph, not Mary, that Jesus is descended from David. It was important in the unfolding story of the coming of the Messiah that the Messiah be descended from David, as the Old Testament prophets had foretold. So Joseph, you see, was needed as a pivotal player in God's plan to come to earth as a human being. If Joseph had not been willing to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit as communicated to him through the angel in a dream, who knows what might have happened.

But Joseph was open to the Spirit's leading, even though it threw his preconceived notions completely out the window. As New Testament scholar Eugene Boring says, "By Joseph's decision to obey the startling and unexpected command of God, he is already living the heart of the law and not its letter, already living out the new and higher righteousness of the kingdom. In a difficult moral situation, he attends to the voice of God, and he is willing to set aside his previous understanding of God's will in favor of this word from the living and saving God" (*The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII*, Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 136-137).

Are we also willing to be open to the leading of the Spirit in the difficult decisions of our day? Joseph has much to teach us about true righteousness. It is when we follow the spirit of the law, rather than the letter of the law, that we are truly righteous.

Is Joseph "a man to be stuck for centuries in the back of the stable?"

*This Christmas, let us give thanks to God
for this man of incredible faith
into whose care God placed the Christ Child.*

*As a gesture of gratitude,
let's put Joseph in the front of the stable.*

--Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*,
Westminster Press, 1987, p. 50.