
Of the Father's Love Begotten
Matthew 1: 18-25

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 22, 2011 by Dr. Christy Lohr Sapp

There is a BBC period drama titled *Call the Midwife* set in post-war London's east end. The show is based on the memoirs of a young woman who gained her midwife training among an Anglican order of nuns dedicated to ensuring safer childbirth for the poor. In the Dockland slums of the 1950s, health care was nearly nonexistent, antibiotics were brand-new, contraception was unreliable, and families with 13 or more children were the norm. Working alongside the trained nurses in the convent, the young midwives in the show make frequent visits to the tenements that house the dock workers and their families

In one episode, the midwives meet with Winnie and Ted who are both on their second marriage and getting on in years. Ted's first wife died at an early age leaving him childless, and Winnie has children from a previous marriage. She has been grateful to Ted for taking them in after they found themselves in a lurch following her first husband's death. Pregnant again in her middle-age, Winnie is in denial about the impending birth to the point of being cagy about wanting to have the child. Ted, on the other hand, is over the moon at the prospect of this child despite his and Winnie's advanced age. When it comes time to deliver the baby, the midwives feel that Winnie is doing everything in her power to keep the baby in while they are trying to bring the baby out. Eventually, they come to understand her resistance as, in the midst of labor Winnie screams out, "I'm afraid the baby will be black!" Ted and Winnie are a seemingly stable, older lower-middle class white British couple, and this new baby is, indeed, black. The midwives struggle to cover their shock at the surprising sight of the child, while a distraught Winnie confesses an affair she had with a foreigner from the docks.

The custom in 1950s labor and delivery was to keep the men outside of the birthing room. When Ted is brought in to see Winnie and the baby, his heart almost bursts with pride. He scoops up the boy, cuddles him, hugs the mother and seems not to register the fact that this is not his biological child. He continues on like that for days, weeks and months until, in the episode's conclusion, Ted is seen as the beaming father who proudly parades his son all around town – deaf to whispers and snickers, blind to sideways glances and looks, and ignorant of gossip and scandal. He loves this boy. He loves his wife, and to him that is all that matters.

I have to wonder if Joseph's relationship to Mary and Jesus is anything like Ted's relationship to Winnie and her son – a little bit foolish and marked by blind love. And, I also have to wonder whether this is anything like God's relationship to us, as well.

Today's gospel reading is all about Joseph, and it is worth pausing for a moment to note the oddity in this. When we think about the nativity story, Joseph is often one of the most overlooked people. In the Christmas pageants there is always a fight over who gets to be Mary or the chief angel. Boys clamor to be a wise man rather than a sheep or a shepherd, but does anyone want to be Joseph? Compare this reading in Matthew to the Gospel of Luke where Joseph plays a very small a role. The three mentions of Joseph in Luke simply feel like a plot device to prop up Mary and Jesus' story: Mary is engaged to him

and, therefore, must accompany him to Bethlehem to be registered, and oh, by the way, he is also in the stable with her and the child when the wise men show up. That is all that Luke says about Joseph at the birth of Jesus.

It's also interesting to note that in the Muslim tradition, Joseph is absent from the nativity story all together. The account of Jesus' birth found in the Quran carries many similarities with the Christian story. Mary is a member of the house of Zechariah and cousin to Elizabeth. She is a virgin who conceives by the power of God. She is grateful for and humbled by the honor that God has bestowed on her. In the Quran, the birth of Jesus is a miracle, but it is a miracle that happens without Joseph. He does not even have a cameo.

How remarkable is it, then, that today we get a whole chapter dedicated to Joseph? Matthew is telling us that Joseph has an important place in the life of Jesus, and I think we can learn much about faith, family, fatherhood, and most importantly, love through his story.

Imagine for a moment what it must have felt like to be Joseph. Here he is, a man engaged to a woman whom he respects and loves and to whom he is committed – emotionally and legally. And, she turns up pregnant. He must have been shocked. He must have been devastated. He must have felt betrayed to his core. Who was the father? How could he have gotten it so wrong to trust and commit to this young woman? What would his friends and his family say? It would have been perfectly within his right to cast Mary off, to have nothing to do with her, to reveal her disgrace and drop her like a lead weight. After all, Joseph knows where babies come from, and he knows that he has never “known” Mary ‘in that way’. How humiliating must it have been for him to learn of Mary's pregnancy. How heartbreaking it must have been for him to struggle with what to do next.

The law of the day is both clear and clearly on his side. Adulteresses are to be stoned. This is the way justice is enacted and honor is restored. Justice means that he leaves her. His heart, however, wants to protect her. Joseph is compassionate and caring. He does not want to bring shame to Mary or set her up to be ruined.

As he wrestles with his dilemma, the text describes Joseph as a ‘righteous man’. Righteousness is one of those words that has a lot of nuance. On the surface, it simply points to someone who is moral and upright. In the context of the Hebrew Scriptures, righteousness indicates that someone follows the law and the commandments. A righteous man is one who has entered into God's covenant with Israel and lives in obedience to the law.

Yet, Joseph does not just live in obedience to that law. Rather, he also lives in obedience to God, and that means a radical departure from the rational constructs of the law and the expectations of society. The righteousness that Joseph demonstrates is entirely tied up with his obedience to God. Being obedient to God requires its own act of faith. It takes courage, open-mindedness and a willingness to trust in God's word. This is the obedience of faith that Paul writes of in our second lesson today. Joseph models righteousness tempered with mercy. This is God's righteousness. God's righteousness is

not vengeful; it is salvific. It is marked by grace. This obedience in faith leads Joseph into a deeper relationship with God and reveals a deeper understanding of God's love for the world.

Through his obedience, Joseph's humiliation turns into humility. Do you think he must have felt a great sense of relief the next morning when he woke knowing exactly what to do? I like to think that his heart was light and his face was beaming when he decided to act on the side of love. Joseph's obedience liberates him to show grace toward Mary. Admittedly, this grace is totally counterintuitive. But that is what makes it grace.

By living into this grace, Joseph is helping to prepare a way for the Lord of Love to enter his family and the world. In being obedient to God, Joseph is freed from the weight of retributive justice, and, instead, he is liberated with restorative grace. Obedience in faith means favoring relationships over retaliation. It means putting another's well-being above his own pride. This is absurd by social norms, but like Ted, Joseph is a bit of an old fool. He is blinded by love and driven by the obedience of faith.

There is another important aspect of Joseph's obedience. He enacts it willingly, not resentfully. A petulant Joseph might have followed the letter of the command but not the spirit of it. He might have kept Mary as his wife but treated her with contempt. He might have claimed the child as his own, but not embraced Jesus lovingly. But we get no sense that Joseph is a half-hearted foster father or dead-beat dad marginally involved in this boy's life. Rather he puts the wellbeing of mother and child ahead of his own. We see this in his remaining committed to the marriage contract despite the shame of a prematurely pregnant bride. We see this when he flees to Egypt. When Herod's army seems set on destroying children who might fulfill the Messianic prophecy, Joseph obeys another command to get Jesus and Mary to safety. He remains with them in Egypt until he is told to return as a family to Nazareth. During this time of exile, he leaves everything he knows in order to keep mother and child safe. This is both an act of love and an act of faith.

The verses preceding this morning's reading in Matthew recount Joseph's ancestry. Forty-two generations are traced back to Abraham to show Joseph's connection to the house of David. Abraham is the father of the faith. This family history is important as it places the baby Jesus in an ancient Jewish tradition. As we have been hearing throughout this Advent season, a great leader was prophesied to rise up out of the house of David. That leader is Jesus. By naming the child as his own son, Joseph is fulfilling the prophecy. He gives Jesus the gift of family. He gives Jesus the gift of belonging to an important household. And he gives Jesus a place in a tradition of faithfulness.

But this boy, Jesus, is also known by another name: Immanuel which means "God is with us". This name connects the child to scriptural tradition. It also offers a salient theological reminder that the holy family is never alone. God is with them. God is with Joseph throughout his struggle with Mary's pregnancy and Jesus' paternity. God is with Joseph as he becomes a model of fatherhood. God is with Joseph as he nurtures and protects this precious child and his mother. This is not a promise of an easy life. This is not a jingoistic promise about might and dominance. Rather, it is a humble assertion that God is there with Joseph and with Jesus as God has been with so many generations before.

This name is also an incarnational message for us today, as well. God is with us. God comes into the world as an act of love and dwells with us in the mess of life. When we choose love over hate, God is with us. When we choose forgiveness over resentment, God is with us. When we choose mercy over stark justice, God is with us. God comes to Joseph in a dream, but God also comes to Joseph – and to all of us - in the flesh. If we can muster the courage to be obedient in faith and to trust what God commands us to do, then we, too, might just experience the joy that comes with grace. Welcoming God to be with us in the midst of our struggles might lead us from a dark night into a bright morning. Like Dr. Seuss's Grinch, our hearts might just grow five sizes the day we invite God to be with us in our sadness, with us in our shame, with us in our loneliness, with us in our frustration.

God being with us might not always look the way we expect it to, though. It might mean forgiving someone who has hurt us to the core. It might mean continuing in relationship with someone who betrayed us. It might mean leaving everyone and everything we hold dear to protect the vulnerable. It might mean trusting in the promise that God's love will be with us – turning our humiliation into humility, our sinfulness into sanctification and our obedience into faith - evermore and evermore.