

12-10-17 BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

LET'S KEEP JOSEPH IN CHRISTMAS

Pastor Becky Smithey

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-2:23

Some of us may have been blessed or be blessed to have a father like Joseph. Others of us may be blessed to know men like him.

If you knew Joseph, you might have noticed his eyes first, and then his hands. His eyes would be accustomed to studying a line on a stone block wall or making sure a wooden joint was right on square. His face would be leathered by the Galilean sun and wind, and his eyes would look at you with an openness, a straightforwardness that you would immediately trust. Joseph is the kind of guy you would want as your carpenter. His hands were a working man's hands, rough and beat up. And he was honest, caring.

If we study what the Scriptures say about Joseph we will notice that he appears to have been a quiet guy. Not a single word is recorded from Joseph's mouth. But his role in the birth and upbringing of Jesus was indispensable. Joseph was the strong, silent type.

He was a man who worked hard—a man who could be counted on. You know the type. These guys are very seldom the chair of the committees, but they serve faithfully, and everyone respects their judgment, even if it's only given with a nod or a smile. They are men of integrity. Their word is their bond. A handshake for them is better than a signed contract.

Jesus had a really good earthly daddy. How important is that? We are told that Joseph and his family “settled in a city called Nazareth...” And what we know is that Nazareth was a tiny town. Scholars suggest that it was made up of a few hundred people, maybe only a hundred and fifty—perhaps even the same amount of people who are in this sanctuary this morning.

And we think of Joseph as a carpenter. The Greek word that the Bible uses literally means “artisan” or “builder” or “stone mason.” And most likely, when Jesus got old enough, he worked side by side with his dad.

Four miles outside of Nazareth, the Romans were rebuilding a pretty good size city, and it's likely that Joseph and Jesus would walk or ride an ox cart daily to build homes and public buildings in that city. Then, they would walk back home where Mary would have supper waiting. That kind of work has been going on across centuries, everywhere.

Now, think for a moment. What does a good, kind-hearted father with a thoughtful and obedient son do on a typical workday? In that 4-mile trek did Joseph and Jesus talk about God?

Did, even this quiet man, talk to Jesus about important matters as they walked and worked together?

My daddy talked about things like that when I was a child, when we did things together. My daddy would make observations that stuck with me, and I bet Joseph did as well.

Another thing we know about Joseph is that he walked closely with God. He listened to God and did what God said. In Bethlehem, after Jesus was born, after the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord, in a dream, said to Joseph, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt’...Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt.”

And, as you know, that is just one of many examples of Joseph’s obedience to God. Joseph and Mary obeyed both the Mosaic laws and the laws of the land. They made the 90-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, probably on foot, to be registered for the census under Roman law. They circumcised Jesus on the 8th day. Then they took Jesus to Jerusalem for purification where the upper and middle class people would donate a lamb, but the poor were required to dedicate two turtledoves, and that’s what Joseph did. Joseph and Mary even brought Jesus back to Jerusalem every year, as it was required, for Passover.

So Joseph was a good, law abiding, God-fearing, blue collar Jewish man. This is what makes how he dealt with Mary, in the beginning of our story so very, very fascinating!

First of all, we are told that when Mary and Joseph were engaged, before they got married...which would mean, before they consummated the relationship...Mary got pregnant!

And in the very next verse we are told that “Joseph was a righteous man.” Well, in those days, according to the “letter of the law” as spelled out in Deuteronomy 22, a righteous man “must,” and that word “must” is right there in Deuteronomy 22:24, stone her to death!

And yet, in Matthew 1 we are told that because Joseph was a “righteous man”...”he decided to call off their engagement quietly.” Joseph, contrary to the behavior which was expected from a person who was “righteous” decided not to go by “the letter of the law.” Instead, Joseph chose love, mercy and compassion over the law!

What in the world are we to think of this? As post-modern readers of the Bible some of us may be a bit struck by the similarities between Joseph’s situation and our own. We want to do the “right thing,” and we believe the “right thing” is revealed in the Bible—which it is—and yet if we are to reject “the letter of the law” and choose the Law of Love over and above it—we may be accused by others, and perhaps even by our own selves, of rejecting the Bible and of being “unrighteous” or “unchristian.”

But here it is in the Bible! Joseph is called “righteous” because he decided to act out of love, mercy and care for another’s dignity rather than to strictly adhere to the Law! Of course, this is the exact thing Jesus did throughout His ministry and taught us to do as well!

But right here in the beginning of the story of Jesus, while He is still in His mother's womb—God's Word is instructing us in what it means to be "righteous"—that is, committed to "justice" in a way that respects the Law of the Bible and our call to Love, even if it seems to violate the Law.

Joseph is already demonstrating what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. You know it. It makes up Jesus' teaching from Matthew 5 all the way through the end of Matthew 7. Jesus says over and over again, "You have heard that it was said..." and then Jesus quotes an Old Testament Law... Then Jesus says, "But I say to you..." And of course, what Jesus says sounds quite different than the letter of the Law.

Then toward the end of this long sermon, Jesus, the good carpenter's Son that he was, said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It didn't fall because it was firmly set on bedrock."

And we are told in Matthew 7:28-29: "When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he was teaching them like someone with authority and not like their legal experts."

What are we to make of this, in a world where there are so many fights and arguments about what is right and what is wrong...what is God's will, teaching and way and what is hypocritical, judgmental, unchristian? When Jesus was asked what it was all about...when Jesus was asked what everything boils down to...what did Jesus say? "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind..." and , "love your neighbor as you love yourself." That is righteousness.

That is how Joseph sought to live his life. That is what God asks of us as well. And it's not easy. It takes a lot of discernment...a lot of sensitivity...a lot of thought, and a lot of guts! So many of us forget that we are to love God with our mind as well as with our heart.

So here we have, right here in the beginning of the New Testament—with Joseph—the tension between the prevailing understanding of God's commandments and the new and amazing thing God is doing in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Joseph's decision to obey the startling and unexpected command of God, Joseph is already living the heart of the law and not its letter. He is already living out the higher righteousness of the Kingdom of God.

In an extremely difficult moral situation, Joseph listens to the voice of God, and he is willing to set aside his previous, life-long understanding of God's will in favor of the Word of the living and saving God!

Changing our perceptions and thinking...especially when it applies to God and the Church are especially difficult. That is why the religious leaders of Jesus day couldn't stand Jesus. They thought Jesus was teaching blasphemy. That's why they had Jesus put to death! It takes time for people to change their minds. It's hard.

One of my pastor friends who I adore who is in his upper 90's was sharing about the days of segregation. He was talking about how, not too long ago, in their lifetimes, most folks believed that it was God's will that white people and black people were not supposed to worship at the same church. He said that when he was a young pastor he attended a meeting where a vote was being taken as to whether or not blacks should be allowed to attend white churches just so long as the blacks sat in a segregated spot in the very back of the sanctuary. He said he voted "yes" on this proposition...and that, at the time, he thought that his vote was very progressive and the loving thing to do. He laughs about it in amazement now.

Jesus had a good daddy. Joseph was a wise man, and his wisdom came from his willingness to listen to the voice of God. Joseph was a loving man, and this love came from listening to and learning from the Loving God. Joseph was a merciful man, and God is merciful. Joseph was a righteous man.

There is a lot we can learn from Joseph. Wouldn't it be a terrible shame if we were to take Joseph out of Christmas?

Let us pray: O God, thank you for Joseph, for his willingness to listen to You and to respond obediently. Thank you for his faith and his steadfast loyalty. O Lord, help us to be a people of integrity—at home, in school, at work and through Your Church. Help us to teach our children and other Youth the deep spiritual truths as they encounter a very complex world. Make us open to all people, including those who are different from us. In Jesus' name and for His sake we pray. Amen.