

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SCRIPTURE: Mathew 1:18-25

DATE: December 11, 2016

Place: Auditorium

SUBJECT: Justice

THEME: Love in Justice

SERMON: "Faithful to the Law and Yet..."

Announce Christmas Dinner sign up – ASAP.

Today is our 3rd Sunday of Advent and we light the candle of **Love**. We also want to see the Christmas story from the perspective of Joseph, husband of Mary who was the mother of Jesus. I suspect we will be amazed by the way Joseph shows his love for God and for Mary. So **Come and Stand Amazed** at the love in this perspective of the Christmas story.

He actually features prominently in the events of Christmas but gets very little press, and is seldom talked about. But he shows us an amazing example. I'm talking about:

Joseph

Most of what we know about Joseph we learn from Matthew's gospel. Let's read.

Matthew 1:18-24

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

We often give this story just a passing nod and move on to talk about Mary and Baby Jesus. Joseph is actually very significant Matthew's whole gospel. Just prior to this story, Matthew begins with:

I. The Genealogy of Jesus

Many times we skip over this as well, rather than be amazed with how he recounts it. He includes 5 women in the genealogy.

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Uriah's wife, Mary.

Genealogies are meant to be lists of MEN. But notice the women Matthew chooses to mention.

Tamar became pregnant by her Father in Law - Judah. She should have been stoned along with the father in law. She is a bold, gentile woman who circumvented "the law" and yet is included in the genealogy of Jesus

Rahab – a prostitute, citizen of Jericho – an immoral gentile woman but with a courageous faith – appears in Jesus' genealogy.

Ruth – a Moabite – from a nation that tried to wipe out the Israelites. But she is portrayed as a saint throughout her story. She becomes the grandmother of King David – appears in the genealogy of Jesus

Uriah's wife – Bathsheba – She was probably a Hebrew but married to a gentile. She commits adultery with David, and she appears in the genealogy, though not by name.

And then you have:

Mary – a saint from beginning to end. She accepted her pregnancy as a miracle of God, but it is hard to believe that many others believed that – Joseph did not. Most would have seen her as an immoral woman who deserved to be stoned.

I believe Matthew is giving his readers, and us, clues about the kinds of people the Messiah came to save – women and men, saints and sinners, Jews and gentiles – i.e. everyone – sometimes the least expected.

Matthew concludes his gospel account with the well-known “Great Commission”:

Mathew 28:19 Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations.

He is telling a story of good news for everyone. And as Mathew sets up his story, he includes this account of Joseph. Why? Because Joseph displays the type of love that is needed to carry out the Great Comission. Some have called him:

II. Joseph the Just – from some translations of the text. Here’s one:

Matthew 1:18-19 Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

There are various translations describing Joseph.

“Faithful to the law” – “righteous” – “just”

What does it mean to be just? It is usually:

“One who 1. obeys the law and 2. applies the rules fairly to everyone – i.e. does not bend them for his/her favorites.” This is how Joseph is described. The Law in this case said:

Deuteronomy 22:23 – a betrothed virgin who sleeps with a man is to be stoned along with the man.

Mary is found to be pregnant. She should be stoned. Joseph knows he is not the father. But Joseph, a “just” man decides to break the law and divorce Mary quietly rather than publically expose her. Ken Bailey says:

“Joseph clearly applied an extraordinary and unexpected definition of justice to this crisis with Mary.” Bailey

We begin to get a hint that justice is more than simply “applying the law.” Joseph is just, but he does not apply the law. What else can justice mean?

A. Justice – Responding to brokenness (and even sin) with Grace

One author, in attempting to understand authentic, real faith in God, coined the phrase, “being naked before God”. He describes this as a believer standing before God with no law between the two. For example:

Abraham, is described as a man whose faith made him righteous before God. And yet he was willing to kill his own son Isaac, in order to obey God. Any law – ancient or modern would say that a man should not kill his own son. Abraham’s obedience to God required him to do something that was against any law. And God asked him to do it!! How can that be? Is God against his own laws or do we need a greater understanding of justice – that is, do we need a greater understanding of “following the law?” How about:

Mary She knew it was wrong for a virgin to be pregnant, but because of her relationship to God and her faith in God, she accepted God’s will, even though it was “against the law” and it meant experiencing distress and dread. She knew the law in Deuteronomy. Accepting God’s will could and should cost her, her life. But she did it anyway. She understood a greater definition of justice.

Joseph seemed to understand it as well by the way he acted towards Mary.

Perhaps he learned from the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah’s prophecy there is a picture of a special “suffering servant” through whom God will one day act in history and save his people. One song that describes how the servant acts is found in:

[Isaiah 42:3 a bruised reed he will not break,](#)

[and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;](#)

[he will faithfully bring forth justice.](#) There is that word again – justice.

Justice, as understood by this special servant of God, is **not retributive – (you harm me and I will see that you are harmed)**. This is the most common understanding of justice we think of. When I was little and my brother would hurt me, what did I say? “I am going to tell mommy.” Implying, “and she will do the just thing and hurt you.”

So this justice is not “payback.” It’s something else.

Neither was the servant’s understanding of **justice – “(as) equal application for everyone”**. **(you get the same treatment as everyone else)** This is another common understanding of justice – or fairness.

Recently a sports story talked about a star quarterback on a football team who was benched because he did not wear a tie getting off the team bus. Other less important players

were benched for the same thing. The coach said, “We treat him just like everyone else.” Justice - but they lost the game and so the debate ensued. Was that justice for the team?

Back to Isaiah and the servant who will **bring justice** but will **not break a bruised reed** or quench a faintly burning wick. Let’s try to understand this picture.

Reeds were used in Isaiah’s time and even up to the present to make pens, boats, houses and more. But if you take a reed and squeeze it and bruise it, it tends to fold over. (**pic of a bruised reed**). When that happened, the scribe or builder would simply break the reed and throw in the fire for fuel. It wasn’t good for anything else. (Like when your tomato plant stems get bruised in a storm – you just break them off because they will probably break off any way) – useless, no good any more, throw it out, get rid of it. The servant will not break a bruised reed – but rather tenderly care for it, coddle it, restore it. What a picture of tender, compassionate love.

Another picture from Isaiah:

A faintly burning wick he will not quench.

Every home needed light. Most used **small clay lamps** (pic) with a spout. Oil was placed in the bowl and the wick dipped in the oil and lay up across the spout and was lit, like a candle. When the oil was almost gone, the wick could burn through and the hot ash would fall to the floor and could start a fire. Often a basin of water was placed under the lamp to catch the wick – or you would just snuff out the wick, quench it, when it had served its purpose. Put it out. Get rid of it and the danger it causes.

The servant would not do this – instead of snuffing out this feeble flame – what you should do, the implication is, he will nurse it back to life, rejuvenate it, restore its radiance. This is what Isaiah means when he says the servant – the Messiah, will “faithfully bring forth justice.” Rather than lay down the law, **justice also means** to revive the downtrodden, restore the fainting and give hope to the hopeless. This will be the Messiah’s demonstration of love.

Jesus applied this greater understanding of justice to the woman caught in adultery – brought to Jesus to be stoned. “I do not condemn you,” he said, even though the law required her be stoned. One person made this profound observation about love and justice.

“Love does not ignore the rules, the law, or the truth. But neither is love bound by the rules.” Love can be different than that. And it has been.

We learn that there is a higher meaning and application of justice when love is included in it.

“Joseph looked beyond the penalties of the law in order to reach out with tenderness to a young woman who was no doubt bruised and exhausted. Perhaps he saw Mary as a “dimly burning wick.” (Bailey)

Such an understanding of justice requires a compassionate concern for the weak, the downtrodden, and the outcasts in their need.

This is an essential part of the story of Christmas – we get it from the perspective of Joseph. But there is more.

Matthew not only tells us what **Joseph did**, he describes Joseph’s **feelings**. I’ve called this point:

B. Turning Fuming to Grace

Joseph learned from the community that his fiancé was pregnant!! He calmly thought, “Hmm. Let me think about this.” NOT!! Remember Joseph did not have his dream right away. He must have been fuming, felt betrayed, perhaps jealous. You can imagine or perhaps have experienced the feelings of a spouse’s unfaithfulness. And yet, many translations render what Matthew wrote this way.

Matthew 1:20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream,

Not wrong but perhaps misleading.

The word Matthew uses can be “considered” but it can also mean – **“he became angry.” Or “very upset.”**

The same word is used to describe the **wrath** of the congregation in the synagogue that wanted to stone Jesus for his preaching. And it is used of King Herod’s **“rage”** when he discovered that the wise men tricked him and went home a different way. This led him to kill all the baby boys 2 years old and under in Bethlehem. It’s not just thinking about it, it fuming.

So we are talking about an emotion of anger or fuming at the apparent betrayal that Joseph is feeling when he hears of Mary’s pregnancy.

An old Arabic translation of Mathew’s gospel says: **“While he was disturbed over this matter...”**

Perhaps we should more accurately read our story, to capture Joseph's humanity, and feelings, **"while he fumed over the matter..."**

This does not degrade Joseph's part in the story at all. In fact it enhances it. Joseph is a human being of remarkable spiritual stature. **"He possessed the boldness, daring, courage and strength of character to stand up against his entire community and take Mary as his wife,"** in spite of what he likely felt at first.

His understanding of justice allowed him to **reprocess his anger into grace**. Instead of lashing out in anger – Joseph extended grace to Mary.

Jesus shows this same ability in two parables that he tells.

C. Two Parables of Jesus

In **Luke 14** Jesus tells a parable of a man who organizes a banquet and invites guests. They all decline with excuses and the man **"became angry."** He does not lash out at those who rejected his invitation. Amazingly his response is to **extend "grace"** to others to the unworthy outside of the community – and invite them to the banquet. **Reprocessing anger into grace.**

Another parable Jesus tells in **Mark 12**. A farmer plants a vineyard and rents it out to tenants. When he tries to collect the rent, the tenants mistreat, insult, beat and finally kill the farmer's servants who were sent to collect the rent. The farmer, undoubtedly angry about this, chooses instead of justified retaliation, to extend grace to the tenants, by sending his Son, alone, vulnerable, unnamed – hoping that they will respond favorably to the son.

He's turning justifiable anger into a response of grace towards the offender. One author asks, "Did Jesus grow up with a living model for the two main characters of the parables." Was it his stand-in dad? Joseph the Just – who modeled it by his response to Mary?

What amazing love, exhibited by Joseph.

He understands: **Justice** is **"Responding to brokenness with grace and compassion."**

It is: **reprocessing just anger into grace.**

Isn't this the good news of great joy that is for all people, The Christmas Story?

The God of Infinite justice has responded to our vulnerability, brokenness and weakness with infinite grace and compassion. He has reprocessed his justifiable anger towards us into grace by sending his own Son, as a vulnerable, weak, helpless baby – Jesus.

I believe the call to all his followers, is for us to model this same justice in our homes, communities, nation and world. It is for us to model this as Joseph did. One author captured the essence of this whole perspective in a letter, as Joseph may have written home to his mom.

III. "A Letter Home to Mom"

Dear Mom,

We're still in Bethlehem--Mary and I and little Jesus.

There were lots of things I couldn't talk to you about last summer. You wouldn't have believed me then, but maybe I can tell you now. I hope you can understand.

You know, Mom, I've always loved Mary. You and dad used to tease me about her when she was still a girl. She and her brothers used to play on our street. Our families got together for supper. But the hardest day of my life came scarcely a year ago when I was twenty and she only fifteen. You remember that day, don't you?

The trouble started after we were betrothed and signed the marriage agreement at our engagement. That same spring Mary had left abruptly to visit her older cousin Elizabeth in Judea. She was gone three whole months. After she got back, people started wondering out loud, "Is she were pregnant?"

I remember the day when I finally confronted her with the gossip. "Mary," I asked at last, "are you going to have a baby?"

Her clear brown eyes met mine. She nodded.

I didn't know what to say. "Who?" I finally stammered.

(Mom, Mary and I had never acted improperly--even after we were betrothed.)

Mary looked down. "Joseph," she said. "There's no way I can explain. You couldn't understand. But I want you to know I've never cared for anyone but you." She got up, gently took my hands in hers, kissed each of them as if it were the last time she would ever do that again, and then turned towards home.

She must have been dying inside. I know I was.

The rest of the day I stumbled through my chores. It's a wonder I didn't hurt myself in the woodshop. At first I was angry and pounded out my frustrations on the doorframe I was making. My thoughts whirled so fast I could hardly keep my mind on my work. At last I decided just to end the marriage contract with a quiet divorce. Oh I loved her too much to make a public scene.

But I couldn't talk to you. Or anyone, for that matter. I went to bed early and tried to sleep. Her words came to me over and over. "I've never cared for anyone but you.... I've never cared for anyone but you...." How I wished I could believe her!

I don't know when I finally fell asleep. Mom, I had a dream from God. An angel of the Lord came to me. His words pulsated through my mind so intensely I can remember them as if it were yesterday.

"Joseph," he thundered, "don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because her baby is conceived in her by the Holy Spirit."

I couldn't believe my ears, Mom. This was the answer! The angel continued, "She'll give birth to a son, and you are to name him, Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The angel gripped my shoulders with his huge hands. For a long moment his gaze pierced deep within me. Just as he turned to go, I think I saw a smile on his shining face. I sat bolt upright in bed. No sleep after that! I tossed about for a while, going over the words in my mind. Then I got up and dressed quietly so I wouldn't wake you.

I must have walked for miles beneath the moonless sky. Stars pricked the blackness like a thousand tiny pinpoints. A warm breeze blew on my face. I sang to the Lord, Mom. Yes, me, singing, if you can imagine that. I couldn't contain my joy. I told God that I would take Mary and care for her. I told Him I would watch over her--and the child--no matter what anyone said.

I got back just as the sun kissed the hilltops. I don't know if you still recall that morning, Mom. I can still see it so clearly in my mind's eye. You were feeding the chickens, surprised to see me out. Remember?

"Sit down," I said to you. "I've got to tell you something." I took your arm and helped you sit down on the big rock out back. "Mom," I said, "I'm going to bring Mary home as my wife. Can you help make a place for her things?"

You were silent a long time. "You do know what they're saying, don't you, son?" you said at last, your eyes glistening.

"Yes, Mom, I know."

Your voice started to rise. "If your father were still alive, he'd have some words, I tell you. Going about like that before you are married. Disgracing the family and all. You... you and Mary ought to be ashamed of yourselves!"

Mom, you'd never have believed me if I'd tried to explain, so I didn't. Unless the angel had spoken to you, you'd have laughed me to scorn.

"Mom, this is the right thing to do," I said.

And then I started talking to you as if I were the head of the house. "When she comes I don't want one word to her about it," I sputtered. "She's your daughter-in-law, you'll respect her. She'll need your help if she's to bear the neighbors' wagging tongues!"

I'm sorry, Mom. You didn't deserve that. You started to get up in a huff.

"Mom," I murmured, "I need you." You took my hand and got to your feet, but the fire was gone from your eyes.

"You can count on me, Joseph," you told me with a long hug. And you meant it. I never heard another word about it. No bride could hope for a better mother-in-law than you those next few months.

Mom, after I left you I went up the road to Mary's house and knocked. Her mother glared at me as she opened the door. Loudly, harshly she called into the house, "It's Joseph!" almost spitting out my name as she said it.

My little Mary came out cringing, as if she expected me give her the back of my hand, I suppose. Her eyes were red and puffy. I can just imagine what her parents had said. We walked a few steps from the house. She looked so young and afraid. "Pack your things, Mary," I told her gently. "I'm taking you home to be my wife."

"Joseph!" She hugged me as tight as she could. Mom, I didn't realize she was so strong. I told her what I'd been planning. "We'll go to Rabbi Ben-Ezer's house this week and have him perform the ceremony." I know it was awfully sudden, Mom, but I figured the sooner we got married the better it would be for her, and me, and the baby.

I said, "Mary, even if our friends don't come, at least you and I can pledge our love before God." I paused. "I think my Mom will be there. And maybe your friend Rebecca would come if her dad will let her. How about your parents?"

I could feel Mary's tiny frame shuddering as she sobbed quietly.

"Mary," I said. I could feel myself speaking more boldly. "No matter what anyone says about you, I'm proud you're going to be my wife. I'm going to take good care of you. I've promised God that."

She looked up.

I lowered my voice. "I had a dream last night, Mary. I saw an angel. I know."

The anguish which had gripped her face vanished. She was radiant as we turned away from the house and began to walk up the hill together.

Just then her mother ran out into the yard. "Wait," she called. She must have been listening from behind the door. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"I'll get your father," she called, almost giddy with emotion. "We..., We...", she shouted as she began to run to find her husband. "We ... are going to have a wedding!"

That's how it was, Mom. Thanks for being there for us. I'll write again soon.

Love, Joseph (by Ralph Wilson)

Pray

Father, what an amazing show of love, by one of your humble servants, Joseph. Father, what an amazing show of love by you and your Son, Jesus. Remind us often this Christmas season that your love compelled you to extend grace where we deserved wrath. Remind us often that you seek to restore, revive, lift up and give us hope, rather than quenching, breaking and discarding us. May we run to you and find life.

In Jesus Name, Amen

Song.

Benediction.

As you go, may you experience the exhilaration of knowing God's love for you, and may you boldly extend that same love to others, especially the marginalized, the downtrodden, the vulnerable, the defeated. Go in the power of God's Holy Spirit.