

Sunday December 11, 2022
Lesson 2: Doing the Right Thing
Scripture: Matthew 1: 18-25

Context:

We continue our unit “Power and Vulnerability” as we dive into part of the nativity story. On this third Sunday of Advent, we look to the story of Joseph in the gospel Matthew and examine his decision to do the right thing. Today’s focus will be to look at the tie of righteousness and personal honor.

In the opening verses of the gospel of Matthew, we are given a genealogy of Jesus. While for modern readers, this might seem strange, it carries with the tradition of the time to know one’s background. Despite the discrepancies of the genealogy in the gospel of Matthew to the gospel of Luke, the focus is still on connecting Jesus to Joseph. While the text today points to his birth as connected to the Holy Spirit, the earthly line to King David is of paramount importance. While Jesus was not David’s son by the natural process of male procreation, it is by God’s will he becomes connected to the line.¹ God’s intention becomes clearer as the text continues and unfolds.

We are fully introduced to Joseph by way of his future bride, Mary. Jesus Christ, the son of God is to be borne by the virgin Mary and will be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. In Matthew’s version of the event, Joseph becomes aware of the pregnancy before he learns the cause.² Because Joseph is a “just” man though; he is moved to act differently than others. Because of her actions, he is given the choice whether to continue the relationship as she carries a child not conceived with him, or he may go on to release her, a justifiable action. He determines to quietly divorce her and to step away without causing a scene.

Yet God intervenes and sends an angel to Joseph as he slumbers. The angel addresses him as “son of David,” alerted to the fact that Joseph’s role in this story has to do with his Davidic descent and reminds us how the miraculous conception announced to Joseph has to do with Jesus’ Messiahship.³ The angel tells him who this mysterious child is in Mary’s womb and the story he will play in their lives and in the entire world. His name will be Jesus, or *Yehoshua* in Hebrew. The translation *Yeshua* comes from the verb “save” and the noun “salvation.”⁴ The angel also tells him of the connection to prophecy as God promised to be with humanity, Emmanuel.

As Joseph wakes up, he does exactly what is asked of him, and he goes to be wed to Mary. He waits to consummate the marriage, and when the child is born, he is given the name Joseph was instructed to give him. Jesus is born as tied to the Son of David, with his earthly father Joseph helping to raise him alongside Mary.

¹ Hare, Douglas. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 8.

² Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

Application

I will never forget teaching the Christmas story one time in a Sunday school class at one of the churches I grew up in. I would return on the fourth Sunday of the month from college and teach them, a class full of the older matriarchs in the church. After talking about the shepherds, Mary, and Joseph, I will never forget one of the women who never spoke suddenly chiming in. “We always forget about Joseph. How can we forget about what he did and how he just followed what God told him to do. We need to talk more about Joseph.” Following this quip from a wise yet quieter disciple of our Lord, I too have often thought of Joseph and given thanks for his witness.

If you’re lucky, you can think of people who represent personal honor and righteousness. We can think of the gentle patriarch who is generous and full of good humor. We smile as we think of the good matriarch who radiates devotion and respect. We think of the people who we watch who do the right thing when no one is looking because it is who they are as a people.

Joseph is indeed one of those people as we read of the Christmas story. All of his actions speak to someone who is not just about public perception or personal appearance. He is about matching actions with words, tempering mercy and compassion with religious devotion. He is the one who sees a tie between righteousness and personal honor.

Honor is a word we might reserve for times of old or thinking about awards given in school. Yet honor still holds a place in our world today. We expect people, especially those in leadership, to act honorably. We think to have honor means to have yourself put above reproach, your integrity and appearance completely intact in front of the world.

At times to keep honor means seeking ways to ensure others see us in a certain way and we follow the societal norms. We keep up the appearances and we seek the ways to come across to others. Honor can simultaneously be about public perception and integrity at the same time.

Yet in other ways, this public perception of honor can sometimes clash with righteousness or doing the right thing. Doing the right thing means in some ways putting aside what people think or feel and carrying forward to be ethical. Sometimes being honorable and righteous can go hand in hand. And in other times, being righteous means the public or society may not hold you as honorable, especially in situations where perception and reality collide.

Often leaders are taught very early on how doing the right thing will not always be the popular thing. People will always assign false motivations or desires to what leaders do in order to fit their own agenda or story they want to share. It is part of leadership to learn how doing the right thing might cause one damage to the perception of one’s public honor. And yet doing what God asks us to do is more important than pleasing or appeasing others’ perceptions of us.

We do not know what happened when Joseph wed Mary as she was already pregnant. We do not know if there were whisperers or naysayers. Maybe some folks cared, or others just lifted their eyebrows just a smidge.

Whatever people did or didn’t say or do, Joseph carried forward and let the people talk and whisper. God had called him to this role and who was he to disobey the high God and the vows he had intended to make? As Joseph moved forward, his righteousness tied him to the Lord and Savior as he raised him in his home, fed him food from his table, and took him to the Temple.

We live in a world where people love to whisper and talk. It doesn’t matter whether you live in a bustling city, a subdued suburb, or a tiny town. People love to talk about folks, who did that or who was caught hanging out with who. And yet at the end of the day, what matters is who

God called us to be. Did we show kindness to the kid who was left out and labeled weird by his peers? When it came to the unwed mother giving birth, did we give her narrow glances instead of welcoming the little one? When it comes to “sinners,” did we take a look in the mirror and realize God loves them as much as we realize we are sinners too? And guess what, God loves us too! Joseph was given a call by God to do the right thing. He gave us a witness to help us be who God calls us to be, even when others do not care or want some good gossip. God gives us both the personal honor and righteousness to be who God made us to be.

Why do you think Joseph is important to the Christmas story and Christian tradition? Who are the Josephs in your world? What does it mean to be a person of righteousness and honor to you? Who are the people God calls you to be righteous towards instead of condemnatory or dismissive? What spiritual disciplines can you use to help you grow in righteousness and personal honor?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009