

Are We There Yet? (Love)

Preached FCCW on December 22, 2019

Matthew 1:18-25

With the lighting of the Candle of Love this morning we have completed our circuit around the Advent wreath. We are nearer than ever to the end of our Advent journey together, and what we discover is that the best has been saved for last. And the best is love. The Bible tells us that God *is* love! Love is the essence of God's nature. And since we are created in God's image, then love is—at least in theory—the essence of *our* nature, as well. But we all require some divine intervention, to coax that loving nature from theory into reality.

The Commandments and the Law of Moses were intended to do just that. They set boundaries that reveal when our human tendencies towards things like greed, lust and violence are getting in the way of the love of God that we were created to reflect and embody in our relationships. But when rules and Commandments are read in a way that is detached from the compassion they are intended to instill; they can become a means for justifying or tolerating un-loving thoughts and deeds. Jesus taught that the whole divine Law could be summed up in two commandments that both revolve around love. Love God with all your being and energy, and love your neighbor as well as you love yourself.

A clergy colleague once told me that whenever he was unsure about the right course of action to take, he would pause and ask God to show him which choice represented the most *loving* thing to do.

Joseph is described as being a righteous man, which tells us he was a good example of someone who earnestly kept the Commandments. He was engaged to be married to Mary. In Joseph's culture, engagement was as legally and morally binding as marriage, which is why Joseph is described in this passage as Mary's husband, even though they had not yet formally wed and consummated their marriage. But Mary was pregnant and Joseph was certain he was not the father. Being a righteous man, Joseph knew the rule about what happens if the woman to whom you're engaged is bearing someone else's child. Both the woman and the man whose child it was could be sentenced to death by stoning.

Joseph was faced with a difficult choice. I imagine that sleep did not come easily to Joseph on that night when Mary broke the news to him, as he wrestled with a confusion of emotions and questions about their future. At last, Joseph settled on what probably seemed to him to be the most loving response to an extremely complicated situation. He decided to end the relationship "quietly," in order to spare Mary the consequences of her condition. And, maybe, to lessen for himself any association with her public disgrace.

Then he closed his eyes and fell off to sleep. Not the peaceful sleep of one whose mind and heart rest in harmony with one another. But the troubled sleep of someone whose best choice can only be described as the least undesirable on a list of poor options. In his unsettled dreams, an angel appears to him with a message. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife”.

What did being *afraid* have to do with Joseph’s decision to dismiss Mary quietly? Fear corrodes our capacity to love others selflessly. Love is an unconditional commitment and unconditional commitments are a natural trigger for fears about the unknown. In the context of marriage, we call this fear “pre-wedding jitters” or “getting cold feet.” In the broader context of what Jesus meant when he spoke of loving your neighbor as you love yourself, this fear of commitment goes by the name of indifference.

It takes a certain kind of courage to stand in solidarity with someone not for what we have to gain by it, but for what they risk losing as a result of our inaction. I guess we don’t usually associate love with courage. We connect love with sentimentality, with romance, or with vulnerability. But the love that God continually calls us to, is a courageous kind of loving.

Throughout the pages of the Old Testament God speaks through prophets who remind God’s people that they are to love bravely. In order to emphasize the radical nature of the love God called them to show, He used the example of loving widows, children and the foreigners living among them. This was not intended to be an exhaustive list. Widows, children, and aliens were representative of all people who comprised the lowest and most vulnerable echelons of society. It was any class of people whose needs were easiest to trivialize, whose problems were the most convenient to blame on their own faults, and who were the most socially acceptable to ignore with a quiet dismissal.

When the child of Mary grew to manhood, these were exactly the people to whom he showed the most love and compassion. He sided with the poor. He partnered with the outcasts. He associated with the despised of society. He did it all without being deterred by a fear of the condemnation of the so-called righteous people; who did, in predictable fashion, condemn him for the love he showed. “This man associates with sinners and eats with them”, they murmured disapprovingly. Despite the opinions of others and the damage to his own reputation, Jesus did not quietly dismiss those who the world silenced. Not even for fear of the politically powerful, even though they held and eventually exercised, their power of life and death over him.

And who can say but that the bravery of Jesus’ love for stigmatized others was not in some way influenced by Joseph’s eventual fearless commitment to Mary?

The choice to divorce himself from Mary, however quietly, would mean that Joseph could safely walk away from the stigma that *she* would have to bear for the rest of her life. But, marrying her would mean that he was willing to share the burden of Mary’s shame. When Joseph awoke from his angel-interrupted sleep, his previous resolve about how to handle his relationship with

Mary had been replaced with a new resolution. He did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took Mary as his wife.

What did the angel say that swept away Joseph's fears and suspicions? Just this. The angel helped Joseph to look at Mary's circumstances from God's perspective, rather than from a solely human viewpoint. "The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." This was more than just a corroboration of Mary's incredulous explanation for her pregnancy. It was an affirmation that the heart of the matter was not Mary's love for Joseph, or Joseph choosing the most loving course of action for Mary, but of God's love for humanity working through these two, ordinary people.

Ordinary people like you and me face complicated decisions every day where we are challenged to prayerfully consider the most loving path to take, rather than just reacting on our own emotions. Often, they have to do with face-to-face, interpersonal relationships. Like, what is the most loving way to respond to a friend or family member with an addiction. Or, what is the most loving course of action to take for the elderly parent whose needs surpass your ability to continue as a primary caregiver?

But we also face big-picture challenges. Situations where we are called to act for people who we don't know personally but who we witness suffering some form of injustice. At the recent Annual Meeting, where the Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island Conferences merged into the new Southern New England Conference, the keynote speaker, Valerie Kaur, spoke about what she called revolutionary love. Revolutionary love is not a sentimental love that we feel as an emotion, like the love of a mother for a child. Revolutionary love is a choice; an active form of caring for others with whom we have no association other than the association of our shared humanity. And the association that we share through our common calling, as followers of Jesus, whose love sparked the greatest revolution of all.

We speak of Advent as a time of waiting. Of waiting for the birth of Mary's child, Jesus. Of waiting for the return of Jesus and the fulfillment of God's Kingdom. Let us not forget the long Advent of God's waiting. Of God's waiting for the revolutionary love that was birthed in Jesus, to be rebirthed in each and every one of us. A love that we express through acts of the will as we are led, as was Joseph, to discern and to follow God's will.

Are we there yet?

Not yet.

But by our faith, it has been conceived in us.

Do not be afraid to let it be born through you.

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