

Joseph: Man of Compassion

sermon digest

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Matthew 1:18-25

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At first glance, the most you can say about him is that he is little more than a shadowy figure, who moves almost unnoticed across the story of the Nativity of Jesus. Matthew is the only Gospel that gives him any attention at all; and even in Matthew, he speaks no words and virtually disappears after the first chapter. As a matter of fact, other than the song that Ginny sang for us this morning, I challenge you to find a hymn about Joseph or a stained glass window of Joseph on the order of those dedicated to Mary. In our art and in our Bible readings and in our sermons, Joseph recedes into the background, keeping silent watch over mother and child. Perhaps his diminished presence puzzles you, as it does me, every year in setting up your nativity sets. Every year I scratch my head and puzzle over which of the figurines is meant to be Joseph. Almost any one of the shepherds could serve the purpose; and each year as I set my nativity scene up, I wonder if I am somehow slighting Joseph by putting the wrong man in his place.

Joseph, Matthew tells us, was “a righteous man;” and if you remember the book of Matthew, righteousness is a central theme. It isn’t, however, an unmixed blessing. “Your righteousness,” Matthew has Jesus tell his disciples, “must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees” (5:20). The scribes’ and Pharisees were very righteousness, as was Joseph; but that did not prevent them or him from being a threat to Jesus. “It is not through Herod,” Beverly Gaventa goes so far as to suggest, “that fear first enters Matthew’s story, but rather through the ‘righteous’ man Joseph” [*Christian Century*, D. 15, 1993, p. 1271]. For it was his very righteousness that presented Joseph with a dilemma.

In accordance with the rules of the day, parents usually arranged the marriage of young girls almost immediately after puberty. A contractual agreement that could only be broken by divorce, betrothal meant that a girl continued to live with her parents and abstained from marital relations until the prospective husband could afford to support her and take her into his home or his parents’ home. Unexplained pregnancy during that time signified either adultery or rape, and the man could call for a public trial to determine his prospective bride’s guilt or innocence. Joseph’s sense of rightness could well have compelled him to demand such a trial. If Mary were found guilty, of course, she (and the guilty man if he were known) would be taken into the streets and stoned. Such an outcome would have obviously been tragic for Mary, but it would have meant vindication for Joseph. No one would have blamed him. His reputation would have remained intact; and having made an example of Mary for all young girls to see, he would have risen in the esteem of his elders. He would have enabled “the evil,” as Deuteronomy puts it, to be purged from their midst (22:20-24). And, he would have enjoyed economic gain by being allowed under the circumstances to keep the dowry from Mary’s family.

Joseph’s righteousness, however, was tempered by his sense of decency; and he determined he would “quietly” dismiss Mary. Seen through Joseph’s eyes, it was an act of compassion. Seen through the eyes of Mary and the infant Jesus, however, it would have been disastrous, for Mary’s pregnancy would have meant that she and her baby would have been disowned by her family and community. Abandoned to wander and live in destitution, she was “damaged goods” that no man would ever want to marry. In the absence of any social safety net to fall back on, the best that she could hope for was a place of servitude in someone’s household.

Icons of the Nativity in the Eastern Orthodox tradition often depict Joseph’s dilemma. Down in the lower left hand corner of the painting is a small depiction of a somber Joseph listening glumly to a sinister looking man. The man may look like the town gossip or he may be a small devil, but the man’s role and character is obvious. He represents the temptation: What will people think?

Joseph was caught in a situation not of his own choosing, and it threatened to destroy everything that he had worked for and everything for which he had dreamed. Walking away and choosing a simpler life with a less complicated, more conventional woman would have been easier. Joseph’s righteousness was informed by a decency and compassion that was not a self-righteousness. It would keep him from pushing the law to its limits and demanding full vindication for the mess in which he found himself. But, as often happens when we view our actions in light of the purposes of God, Joseph’s righteousness, Joseph’s compassion did not go far enough. “Do not be afraid,” God’s messenger told him in a dream. “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” Far from representing the failure of Mary or the evil design of another man, the child she carried symbolized the purposes and action of God. “She will bear a son, and *you* are to assume the role of father and give him his name. Do not fear the gossips; do not fear being judged by those who will interpret your action as the admission of your own guilt, for right here in the middle of seems to be a total mess, Salvation will be born.

Matthew’s story about Joseph—his *parable* about Joseph, if you will—bears important truths for us. It speaks to us, first of all, in our personal lives. It speaks to us in those times when our own hopes and dreams seem to be totally shattered. Such a time may become for us, as it did for Joseph, a time of new beginnings. Although it isn’t obvious to us in our translations, twice in his opening chapter Matthew speaks of what is happening in Jesus as a “genesis” or creation (1:1, 18). Just as early Christians spoke of Jesus and his resurrection as the “eighth day of creation,” Matthew invokes the image of the Spirit of God moving over the waters of chaos in the beginning. Thus the word not just to Joseph, but to us: “Do not fear. God is here. It may not be the life you had planned, but God can be born here, too, if you will permit it” [Copenhaver, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2007, p. 34]. Life and hope can begin anew.

Joseph’s story also says to us that righteousness that is of God is informed by love and compassion. Too often

we have read the stories of Jesus and started and ended our thinking by passing judgment on another century and another religious faith. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves and with God, we will admit that the problem of which we speak is not just about another time and people. We have all seen the harm that someone can do who, in the words of Fred Craddock, carries around a “forty-three pound Bible” with which to damn the sins of others. And we know, too, the problem comes even closer to home as we each wrestle with our own prejudices and readiness to condemn the shortcomings we perceive in others. “Do not judge and dismiss the lives of others or the plight you perceive in your world,” God’s messenger says to us. “God can be born here, too, if you will permit it.”

Karen Armstrong’s autobiography tells the story of her entry into the convent at a very young age—a convent, she is quick to point out, that preceded the reforms of Vatican Council II. Her struggle to no avail to find God there, exacerbated by a frightening health concern, led to her leaving her religious calling. When she was then unfairly denied her doctoral degree, her life seemed in ruins. Only with time was she able to come again to an affirmation of faith—not the faith of her youth, but an affirmation of all religious faiths in their perception of mystery and practice of compassion. After a remarkable career in writing about the world’s religions, Armstrong received in February 2008 the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Award, given for the purpose of helping its recipients launch a dream to change the world. Karen Armstrong’s dream was for support for the creation, launch and propagation of a Charter for Compassion, put together by a group of leading inspirational thinkers from the three Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and based on the fundamental principles of universal justice and respect. With input from more than 150,000 people from 180 countries, religious and inspirational leaders came together and crafted the Charter for Compassion released on November 12 of this year. Less than 30 days from the date on which it was launched, the Charter has been signed by more than 25,000 people. The Charter affirms:

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

The Charter continues with a call to all persons of religious faith and all persons who value morality:

We therefore call upon all men and women ~ to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies

—www.charterforcompassion.org

Reflecting on the beauty of the sun streaming through a stained glass window, Pastor Martin Copenhaver points out that the glass in its original condition was not particularly beautiful. Only as the glass was broken into shards and then painstakingly fit into the grand design of the window with other pieces did a true work of art emerge [Ibid., p. 35]. Perhaps it was not just in spite of but through the brokenness of her early adulthood that Karen Armstrong’s deep insight and grasp of the things that matter most in religion took shape. For her and for us in the darkness that periodically grips our personal lives and so often grips our world, the word of God’s messenger is this: the God of hope, peace and compassion can be born even here, even now. The question for us is will we let it happen? Will we be a part of its happening in ourselves and in the world that God loves?