

The 4th Sunday of Advent: Holy Trinity Church: December 18, 2016

The Feast of the Holy Family: Matthew 1: 8-25:

Check Your Anger and You Ego At The Door.

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was the day after Christmas. Dad was trying to take a nap, but his young son kept finding ways to interrupt his siesta. Finally the father lost his patience and said sternly, “Go to my room, and go now!” Hearing this, the boy’s mother asked, “Why did you tell him to go to your room and not his?” The father replied: “Are you kidding? Did you see all those Christmas presents the kid received? In his room he has a TV, an iPod, an iPad, an Xbox and 3 new electronic games. If we want to teach him a lesson, we have to send him to our room.” How very different is our world from the world into which the Christ child was born.

In today's story from Matthew, Joseph and Mary are betrothed. Here is one example of how things have changed. Betrothal in those days was like a modern engagement, but much more binding. An engagement in today's world can be expensive to break, but being betrothed in the first century meant that a couple had already exchanged vows, and they could only end their betrothal by divorce.

When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant after they were betrothed, he naturally suspected that Mary was guilty of being unfaithful to him. This is hurtful in today's world, but Mary and Joseph came from a region where strict biblical laws were observed, and great care was taken to abide by these laws. If a betrothed couple was found to be with child before the marriage, this brought shame to the entire family. Joseph's reputation would have been affected as well as Mary's.

And so Joseph decided he would divorce Mary, though very quietly. Joseph was a very special man. Even though he was hurt, he didn't want to expose Mary to public disgrace. Even more important, Mary's pregnancy put her life in danger. If Joseph had accused Mary of adultery, which is how a betrayal during betrothal would have been viewed in that culture, she could have been

stoned to death. Matthew tells us it was not in Joseph's character to do this. Still, he planned to end the betrothal.

Then Joseph had a dream. In this dream an angel addressed him with an important title, "Joseph, son of David." Now, Matthew's Gospel is the most Jewish because his audience was Jewish and this becomes very important because it is related to Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. The Messiah would be of the house of David.

The angel told Joseph that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit and that he should not be afraid to marry her. The angel told Joseph to name the baby Jesus, and that the baby would "save his people from their sins." After the dream, Joseph changes his mind and stays with Mary. He names the baby Jesus. By naming Mary's child he is indicating to the world that Jesus is his legal son. During Jesus' time, a father's acceptance of the child mattered more than blood. According to Jewish custom, a child's legal father was his real father. Therefore Joseph's lineage was also Jesus' lineage. This tells us much about Joseph. He was not only a son of David which is important to our story. But he was also a man of God.

We know very little about Joseph outside of the first chapter of Matthew.

Though Paul mentioned Mary, he never mentioned Joseph. After the birth

narrative, there is only one more reference to Joseph in the Gospels. Mary, Joseph and Jesus went to Jerusalem for Passover when Jesus was twelve. They thought Jesus was lost, but they found him in the temple. That is the last we hear about this good man Joseph. Though there is a dearth of information from scripture as well as tradition, many scholars think it is likely that Joseph died when Jesus was quite young. That explains why Joseph was not mentioned with the rest of the family after Jesus had begun his ministry. However, there are some facts about Joseph that we can infer.

First of all, Joseph was a man in control of his emotions. That's important. Some people are ruled all their lives by their emotions.

I read a story about Nigerian woman who is a physician at a great teaching hospital here in the United States. A priest named Gordon McDonald was giving a lecture and she raised her hand to say something kind to him about the lecture. She introduced herself using an American name. "What's your African name?" McDonald asked. She immediately gave it to him. The name was several syllables long with a musical sound to it. "What does the name mean?" he asked. She answered, "It means 'Child who takes the anger away.'" When he inquired as to why she would have been given this name, she said, "My parents had been forbidden by their parents to marry. But they

loved each other so much that they defied the family opinions and married anyway. For several years they were ostracized from both their families. Then my mother became pregnant with me. And when the grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of hostility came down. I became the one who swept the anger away. And that's the name my mother and father gave me." It occurred to me that her name would be a suitable one for Jesus." That name would also have been a good name for Jesus' father, Joseph—"the one who swept the anger away." When someone hurts us, it is so tempting to strike back in anger and hang onto that angry grudge forever. He thought that Mary was pregnant with the child of another man, but he did not seek revenge. He was hurt by this apparent break in their relationship, but he did not seek to hurt her in return.

Joseph did decide to end their betrothal, but when an angel came to him and assured him that things were not as they seemed, Joseph listened and did as the angel instructed. Joseph was a man who could control his emotions. That is such an important truth about Joseph. There are many times in life when all of us will be confronted with situations in which the temptation will be to respond in a hurtful way and say things we can never retract. If we can hold our tongue, control our anger at such times, God can use us in a wonderful way like sweeping anger away.

Late one night, Raymond stumbled to the phone. His heart stopped when he heard a female voice sobbing, “Daddy, I’m so sorry.” His daughter was calling to say she was pregnant. A million thoughts ran through Raymond’s mind as his daughter cried. He and his wife had raised their children in church. They took Christian commitment seriously. This was the last thing they had expected from their child. But Raymond couldn’t be angry with his daughter. She needed his love and support. So he listened and comforted her and prayed that everything would be all right. The next morning, Raymond and his wife wrote a long letter full of love and encouragement and sent it off to their daughter. Secretly they prayed that somehow God would turn back time and return their lives to normal again. A few days later, Raymond received a call from his daughter. “What in the world was the letter about?” she asked. “And where did you get the idea that I am pregnant?” The next day, Raymond called the phone company and asked them to trace the midnight call. Some poor girl, desperate for the love and forgiveness of her father, had accidentally called Raymond’s number. What, thought Raymond, if she returned home to a father who couldn’t comfort or forgive her? My sisters and brothers, there are times when we need to keep our emotions in check.

Joseph listened to the messenger of God through the agonizing pain of what he thought was infidelity, but he did not lash out. He was in control of his

emotions, especially his anger. That's the first thing we know about Joseph. We also know that Joseph was a man of great character. We know this from his willingness to take on the role as Jesus' father. Even though Joseph was not biologically related to Jesus, he was willing to claim him as his own. This gospel story always reminds me of the faithfulness of Joseph.

You see my brothers and sisters, Joseph took his ego and pushed it out of the way and that is our challenge during this 4th and final week of Advent. Our challenge has something to do with getting your own ego out of the way and putting others first. It's an exercise in humility and it's based on a simple trust that, by God's grace, all things really do work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to God's purposes. That's it, to a great extent, isn't it? It's a matter of getting our egos out of the way. It has often been said that a cross is no more than a capital "I" crossed-out. Bearing a cross sometimes means no more than eliminating ego from the equation.

Some of you will remember back in 1985 when Harry Belafonte teamed up with fundraiser Ken Kragen to assemble some of the top names in the recording industry in order to create a hit record and then donate the proceeds to the African famine relief project. Within days pop stars like Stevie

Wonder, Paul Simon, Billy Joel, Willie Nelson, Bruce Springsteen, Kenny Loggins, and Bob Dylan arrived at Kenny Rogers' Lion Share Recording Studio. A few months later the super-group released the hit song "We Are the World," written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie. "We Are the World" became the fastest-selling American pop single in history. Sales exceeded twenty million copies. The project raised over \$63 million in humanitarian aid. A few days before the musicians gathered in the studio, Lionel Richie posted a sign over the entrance that read: "Check your ego at the door." That is so important in all relationships. Joseph checked his ego at the door. Joseph controlled his emotions. Joseph was a man of character and Joseph made a crucial difference in our world. What if Joseph had not been able to "man up," as we say in today's vernacular, and do the right thing? Think how different the story of Christmas might be. But he did "man up." He listened to the words the angel spoke to him and the world has been blessed ever since. He was onstage for just a few moments in this beautiful drama. Still he had an important part. Don't ever assume because you seem to be playing a minor role on life's stage that your life can't have an impact.

Joseph's story changed the world. Who knows how many lives will be touched by us when we control our anger and push our egos out of the way and dump the grudges we hold onto so tightly. The challenge is that when you go through

life able to check your anger and ego at the door, then your life becomes crucial to God's plan for the world. It is through these acts of love, humility, kindness, responsibility, character, and compassion that Jesus Christ is born into your hearts at Christmas and will remain with you forever. Amen.

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