

The Journey to Bethlehem sermon series

“Joseph of Bethlehem – A Higher Righteousness”

[Matthew 1:18-21](#)

As we await the birth of the Christ Child this Advent, it is difficult to hear that issues of righteousness were smack in the middle of such a Holy time. We remember that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was informed by the angel Gabriel that she was pregnant. Mary was not yet married, and she was pregnant! In Mary’s time becoming pregnant before marriage was a sin worth being stoned to death for.

But Mary had no say in the matter. Though a virgin she was pregnant. I believe that God knew Mary would understand what he was doing and trust God. Mary did say to the angel Gabriel who came bearing the troubling news that she was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.”

Powerful words for a young woman who up to that point had had no idea about what was happening to her.

But Joseph, Jesus earthly father, faced the fullness of the dilemma of being engaged to a woman who was pregnant all by himself. On his own he had to decide what was righteous – what was the right thing to do in his situation. In his time and culture, the law said that under the circumstances he should divorce Mary. The law even gave him the power to turn her in to be put to death by stoning. Joseph struggled with what to do.

Joseph knew the child Mary was carrying was not his. He must have felt the sadness and shame of betrayal. He must have thought about what others would say about him if they knew what Mary seemed to have done. Was he a man or not? Was he a righteous man who would do the right thing, the lawful thing? But love and what seems to be a great measure of humility led Joseph to decide to quietly divorce Mary to protect her. That is until God spoke to him.

Joseph, like Mary did ultimately receive divine help in his dilemma. The angel Gabriel had the job of telling Mary that she was pregnant, and of comforting her. Joseph on the other hand was visited by an angel of the Lord in his dreams but only after he had

struggled all alone with the moral and personal dilemma of what to do about what appeared to be Mary's sin and betrayal. Even then, the angel in his dreams told him to trust God and stay with Mary. And Joseph did exactly that!

By trusting God above imperfect human law Joseph became an instrument of God's redemption of the world! With Mary, Joseph made possible the birth of the Christ Child naming him Jesus, the name of the One who saves us from our sins. Later when the Holy Child's life would be endangered, it was Joseph who would lead Mary with Jesus to migrate to the safety of Egypt. It was Joseph who would father the Savior of the world, protecting him from harm, nurturing his faith, showing him what a man of faith looks like and sounds like, and teaching him the pleasure and responsibility of honest work.

Joseph shows us what can happen when we are open to God's higher righteousness. I have been pondering what higher righteousness may mean for us as Christians in our day and age. I would share that I believe that God is calling us to the higher righteousness of welcoming suffering migrants rather than harshly applying imperfect law to them.

Not that long ago I learned of a migrant child who died after facing the many walls of imperfect law. He was 11 years old and from Honduras. One day his mother sent him to the United States to escape poverty, violence, and the possibility of premature death. I wonder whether as she sent her little boy down the road not knowing whether she would ever see him again, she felt what Mary must have felt. Would there be a place of safety for the child of her womb?

This little boy came alone, starting on a van packed with humanity, then walking across countries, and then joining the thousands who have now traveled on the deadly cross-country train in Mexico called The Beast. Migrants travel not in the train but on top of it holding on for dear life many of them falling and losing limbs and life. But that little boy faced each trouble on his journey and conquered it, even The Beast.

When he got to the Rio Grande River, that separates the U.S. from Mexico, somehow, he got across it winding up on the land of a family he did not know and who did not know him. But from that moment he and that family would be eternally bound together as he faced his last trouble. On the land of that unknown family he fell and died.

He died of hunger and thirst. I wonder if he also died of a broken heart having experienced the cruelty of our world and its callous and unrighteous laws. The family upon whose land he died did not know what to do with him, but assuming that he was one

of the unaccompanied children who have come through that region of the world, they called the Border Patrol. It is reported that when the Border Patrolmen came and saw the fragile, broken, dead body of that little boy they fell on their knees by his side and wept. Eventually someone called a local funeral home to come and retrieve the child's body.

At the funeral home, they began to examine that child's body, carefully removing his clothes. When the examiner got to the boy's belt and began to remove it, he discovered something of great significance. On the back side of the small belt buckle was a note that had been taped on. The note stated who the child belonged to and where he was going.

I think of that child all the time. His life and his death will not allow me to rest until sanity and justice comes to this world and no child dies as he did. He also constantly reminds me to consider who I belong to and where I am going. As I share his story with you, I hope that you will consider who you belong to and where you are going. Might we consider together that we belong to God who calls us with Joseph to always go to that place of God's higher righteousness in all we do. Even in response to our immigrant brothers and sisters.

In the spirit of God's higher righteousness that Joseph came to know, I believe God is calling us to fully love and include LGBTQ persons in the church even though our *United Methodist Book of Discipline* excludes and rejects them. Can anyone of us say that a person's sexual orientation determines their worthiness? Are those of us who are heterosexual more worthy than those who are homosexual? Did God our Creator make us and say, "Oh, these homosexual persons over here are not what I intended to create"? Is a person defined and known only by their sexual orientation?

I know a person who loves Christ and serves God with all that he is and all that he has. He expresses his faith and deep Christian commitment everywhere he goes. One day he felt called by God to help an African village that needed water; water that would flow into their community and make their lives less burdensome and healthier. The closest water was many kilometers away. It was hard and time-consuming work for women and children to go and bring the water to the village for their daily needs. This man felt God calling him to help and so he did.

He gathered all the money he had but did not stop there. He asked his friends and even strangers to contribute for the building of a well in an African village on the other side of the world. These people needed life-giving water, and they needed help to make it happen. Before long he was on his way to Africa, to a village whose people he did not know but

loved. God had placed a love within him for these people whom God had called him to serve.

A well was built in the village, but then this man noticed that a school would also help so he joined the people of the village, now his known and beloved friends, in the building of a school. Along the way he had become a close working partner with a woman pastor. They worked together, and they prayed together for the people of God in that place.

After a few years of working and praying together this man felt that he needed to be honest and transparent with the woman pastor. He could no longer allow her to assume that she fully knew who he was. He shared with her that he was a gay man. She looked at him with shock, unable to speak. But then with a full affirmation she said to him, "But you are a man full of the Holy Spirit."

I am reminded of Mary. How could Mary be pregnant without sin? It was because she was pregnant by the action of the Holy Spirit. I believe this man, a friend of mine today, is both a worthy servant of God and a homosexual whose homosexuality carries no sin in and of itself because he was made just as he is by God's action. God created him as he is. So, who are we to judge what God has created, what God has done? We can learn a great deal from Joseph's humble acceptance of what God had done in Mary, and faith in what God was about to do for the world.

In seeking God's higher righteousness, not what the world teaches us but what God teaches us, I believe that God is calling us to love the whole world as our family, beloved of God, our brothers and sisters everywhere, even though our legal identification cards may say that we belong only to the community in the U.S.

We are passing through some difficult times in this country. Because of its global power and reach, difficult times in the U.S. contribute to difficult times in the world. Unfortunately, rather than seeking to unite the world community in problem solving and a spirit of compassionate care for all, we in the U.S. are being led to think only of ourselves. The slogan *America First* is a sign of our times.

As Christians we can be proud of our country, but we should never forget that above our U.S. citizenship is our citizenship in the Kingdom of God. God let us know what his hope for his kingdom among us is when he sent his son, Christ Jesus, our Lord, to save not just one country but the people of every single country in the world. Do you remember the

Gospel words? *For God so loved the world that he sent his Son for its salvation* (John 3:16)!

We serve a Lord who prayed for us, not just some but all of us around the world. The heart of his prayer was that we would be one – one with him, one with each other and one in service to all the world (John 17). How different our world would be if we would look above the laws and policies of our nations and seek the well-being of all God's children. I dare to dream that if we strived for God's higher righteousness, we would be a world at peace. It was the blessing the host of angels would sing on the night of our Savior's birth, *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace. (Luke 2:14)*

I believe in God's higher righteousness that stands on the side of the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted (Matthew 5).

It would have been easier for Joseph to just follow the law of his time. Instead he chose the harder road of being obedient to God's law of a higher righteousness. In doing so he received the highest blessing possible! Jesus our Lord came to abide with him, and through his humble efforts, Jesus comes to abide with each and every one of us. Alleluia!