

Love With Us

Well, here we are, standing on the cusp of Christmas. At most of our homes, the tree is up, lit and hung with ornaments accumulated over the years. How many of those trees, I wonder, still display ornaments featuring photos of small children now grown to adulthood, or at least adult height, or even ornaments made by those children long ago with Popsicle sticks and felt and cotton balls? Presents have been purchased, wrapped and put under the tree or shipped to loved ones in far away towns. The not-yet-grown children or grandchildren are out of school, on break at last after a final week of frantic cramming, test taking and reduced attention spans. The teachers, I'm sure, are as relieved as their pupils to have this bit of waiting over. In our celebration of Advent, though, one last week of waiting has yet to play out, one last Advent lesson is yet to be taught.

It is the Sunday of Love. In our Advent journey, we have celebrated the embodiment in Christ Jesus and the story of his coming the four great spiritual virtues: Hope, Peace, Joy, and the greatest of these is Love. Our Scriptures teach us many things about Love. According to our New Revised Standard Version, the Song of Solomon teaches that: "love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame." That's not a bad rendering of the Hebrew poetry but Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, although a paraphrase, may actually capture the sense as well as the style just a little better: "Love is invincible facing danger and death. Passion laughs at the terrors of hell. The fire of love stops at nothing—it sweeps everything before it. Flood waters can't drown love, torrents of rain can't put it out. Love can't be bought, love can't be sold—it's not to be found in the marketplace." This great teaching can be interpreted as either concerning the love between a man and a woman or the love between God and God's people. The Gospel According to John records that Jesus had a teaching about love that he himself lived out to the fullest: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." And in the First General Epistle of John, we find perhaps the ultimate definition of love: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Although our passage from Matthew this morning never mentions love, I believe it points us to three great love stories. First is the love of Joseph for Mary, not a story often told, even at this time of year. Second is the love of Jesus, both for his friends and for his Heavenly Father and how that love guided his ministry and life. Finally, there is the love of God for us, a love so powerful that it resulted in the Incarnation, the act that gave the ultimate fulfillment to the prophecy of Isaiah: "the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel," which means "God With Us."

We really don't have much information about Joseph in the Bible. We know that he was of the tribe of Judah and the house of David but beyond that our two sources, the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke, don't even agree on his family tree. Matthew tells us of four dreams that came to Joseph: the one I read earlier, one that told him to take his wife and child and flee to Egypt, and two others in which he was told to return to Israel and then to the district of Galilee. In Luke's gospel, Joseph is a mute figure, only seen in relationship to Mary who does all the talking for both of them. Legends from non-Biblical sources tell us that Joseph was a good deal older than Mary. This belief was occasioned in part by the fact that the adult Jesus, who has many interactions with his mother and his siblings, has none with Joseph and never even mentions him. Partly, however, I think this part of the legend came from the sense that Mary should have retained her virginity even after the birth of Jesus and that this was more likely with a

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superannuated spouse than with vigorous young husband. Of the myth of the perpetual virginity of Mary, I will say only that you have to do some pretty creative reading of the Scriptures to claim that Jesus was not the eldest son of a normal, healthy First Century Galilean family. Joseph is far more likely to have been within a few years in age of his betrothed and to have succumbed to a common illness or injury prior to the majority of his most famous son. Or should I say, “step-son.”

It is the peculiar relationship between Joseph and the Son of Mary that leads me to hold up Joseph as an exemplar of love this morning. Matthew tells us that Mary and Joseph were engaged, or betrothed, but that Mary was found to be with child before they lived together. Clearly, Joseph knew that the baby was not his. According to Torah, an unmarried but betrothed woman who had sex with a man who was not her fiancé was as guilty of adultery as a married woman who had strayed and therefore subject to being stoned to death. We might think that as a righteous man, as Matthew describes him, one who followed the Law, that Joseph would likely have turned Mary over to the authorities for such a fate. But Joseph’s sense of righteousness was leavened with mercy and, I suspect, with love, because instead of calling down the force of the law upon his apparently unfaithful betrothed, he instead resolved to divorce her quietly. Once divorced, he must have thought, she could have gone to her lover and become that man’s wife and lived, under a bit of a cloud, perhaps, but ultimately still a part of the community. Joseph would rather see his intended bride become another man’s wife than for her to suffer harm. It is the very opposite of the jealous attitude that has given rise to such popular songs as The Beatles’ “Run for Your Life”: “I’d rather see you dead, little girl, than to be with another man.”

But after his dream, Joseph takes an even more radical act. By allowing the betrothal to stand, he is all but admitting that he was the cause of Mary’s pregnancy and, by the standards of the time, the one who bore the blame for the disregard of “the proprieties,” as Michaelleen Flynn puts it in the movie, “The Quiet Man,” set in another honor-bound society several centuries later. Now it is the “righteous” Joseph who is liable, not to stoning but to public ridicule. To the good people of Nazareth, Joseph is either an impetuous lover who disregards the traditions and standards of his community, if he is the father of the child, or he is a fool, besotted enough by love to accept a tarnished bride and her bastard as his own. He has taken Mary’s shame as his own. The Gospel According to Mark records that memories in Nazareth were long. When Jesus returns to his hometown to preach, the people say, “Isn’t this Mary’s son?” an insult in that day implying that Jesus’ father was unknown. Tongues must have wagged in Nazareth and sly nudges and winks must have been exchanged every time Joseph and his family walked down the street for years after Jesus’ birth. But Joseph, surely knowing all this would be the result, loved Mary enough to pin his hopes on a dream, to make her his wife and to shelter her from shame. Perhaps he was motivated not only by his love for Mary but also by his knowledge of Scripture, for we find time and time again in the words of the prophets that God loves Israel like an ever-forgiving spouse with an adulterous mate.

A man who loves a woman or a woman who loves a man in such a manner is to be remembered. Small towns can be casually cruel places and Jesus must surely have known the gossips’ interpretation of his birth. But he would also have seen for himself, growing up, the love that united Mary and Joseph. And he would have heard from them their version of the strange events that accompanied his entry into the world. Our friend Dick Gibson encouraged us in Adult

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Sunday School to recall the stories we heard about our own origins. I remember pestering my mom, who was around a lot more than my dad, for stories of their meeting and courtship, of her pregnancy with me and my birth. I suspect most of us have similar experiences. I know, for example, that like Jesus' cousin John, there was none of my kindred that was called by this name, Mark Christopher. I was named after a character in a romantic movie that my parents saw during their courtship. Don't you know that the boy Jesus had similar questions? "Mom, there are three other boys in Nazareth named Yeshua and 5 grown men. Why did you have to give me a name like so many other guys?" "Because, son, the angel told us to name you that. Don't you remember what your name means? Yahweh will save us. Isn't that beautiful?" "Yeah, I guess so." And so the boy grew up to become a man who understood what it meant to love even when love wasn't easy, to be kind and polite even to those who sneered at him or his parents, to truly believe that Yahweh would use him in some way to save the people.

It may seem far removed from the Christmas spirit and the usual focus on mangers and shepherds and stars and such but it is important to note that the end of Jesus' earthly story is seen at its beginning. Joseph's willingness to sacrifice his good name for the sake of Mary and her baby presages Jesus' willingness to sacrifice even his life for the sake of others. In accepting the name Yeshua, God will save us, for their son, Mary and Joseph marked him to become the instrument of that salvation. In Joseph's love for Mary and, we can only guess, hers for him, Jesus saw part of the power of love that would lead him to declare, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." In the mysterious will of God, the baby who caused so much trouble, the boy who astonished the priests, the young man who taught with wisdom and authority beyond that which anyone had seen, became the Lamb of Sacrifice for all of Creation. Jesus took up this task willingly – not eagerly, as we know from his agony in Gethsemane, but willingly. As we think of love on this fourth Sunday of Advent, we cannot but see Jesus, whose coming we await again, as the one who reflected God's perfect self-giving love.

How can we say that one man, even one so special, was a true reflection of the greatest attribute of God? Because part of what we prepare to celebrate in Christmas is the miracle of the incarnation, our faith that in Christ Jesus, God truly was with us – Emmanuel. The Gospel According to John tells us that in Jesus, the Word, the generative power of God, became flesh and dwelt among us. In becoming one of us, "just a slob like one of us," as the song said, God shows God's total investment in and love for the Creation. In the Incarnation, the created world is joined with its Creator, sanctified anew and charged with the grandeur of God. It is God's reiteration from the days of creation, when God saw what God had made and said, "It is very good." This is part of our good news to the world, that God, by stooping down to earth and becoming one with the Creation, lifts Creation up to Godself, embracing us all in arms of love.

Our good news of love doesn't stop there, though. We all know the familiar verse, "For God so loved the world, that God gave God's only begotten Son..." But in our understanding of God's triune nature, what is done by the Son is done by the Father as well. God loves the world so much, that God did not hesitate to become one of us and to experience death as we do so that all Creation could be freed from the power of death. God is the ultimate love, the love that will lay down life for the friend, the love that is stronger than death. As Emmanuel, God with us, God stands so close to us that there is nothing that we can experience that God has not experienced,

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nowhere we can go that God is not with us, no pain we can suffer that God does not suffer right along with us.

Because of this, we can dare to proclaim yet another part of the good news. Because of what God in Christ has done, is doing, we are freed to love and serve one another and all those around us without fear of consequences. If God be for us, as Paul wrote to the Romans, who can be against us? We are freed, in this age of the Incarnation when God's love is made visible, to live as God would have us live and to love as God would have us love. We can love and help our neighbors without restraint, for so Jesus did and in his love we are all blessed, in his love we are all saved, just as his name promised.

We stand at the cusp of Christmas. The tree is lit, the presents are ready, the children wait eagerly. All there is left to do is love.