

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Third Sunday of Advent**  
**Sunday, December 11, 2022**  
**10am**

Text: Isaiah 35:1-10 & Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Today we pick up where we left off two Sundays ago in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew traces Jesus' ancestry through his adoptive father, Joseph, and in today's Scripture lesson we zoom in on Joseph's "annunciation."

As we recall from last week's lesson, although Joseph and Mary have not yet had their wedding celebration and consummated the marriage, they are already legally bound to each other under religious law. This means that Joseph can take legal action against Mary for the crime of adultery, which he suspects when he discovers she is pregnant. Whether Mary told him this, or her pregnancy is beginning to show, or Joseph found out through other means is unclear. Any way, he believes Mary has been unfaithful to him.

Matthew calls Joseph "a righteous man" (v. 19). This is the only thing Scripture tells us about Joseph's character. In the Bible, to be a righteous person is to be someone who follows God's will by obeying God's law. And God's law – outlined in the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures that Joseph lived his life by – God's law states there are two ways to dissolve a betrothal: Death or divorce.

We have the benefit of knowing how Mary got pregnant, so in our opinion Joseph's decision to divorce her feels unfair. But Joseph was not in possession of all the facts. Supposing Mary told him about the angel Gabriel's annunciation, do you think Joseph believed her? Saying you got pregnant by the Holy Spirit sounds crazy, or at minimum an attempt to avoid the consequences of adultery. At the time, the legal punishment for adultery was death by stoning (Deut 22:23-27). In practice, the actual punishment was less severe, but it was still deeply humiliating. So, Joseph's decision to pursue a divorce was actually the more merciful option.

The story of Joseph's annunciation is ultimately a story about the tension between justice and mercy. Truthfully, that tension is God's story, too. Mercy is compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone when you have the power and the right to punish or harm them. Joseph possessed both the power and the right. According to the letter of the law, he could punish Mary for her supposed unfaithfulness, and this would by all accounts make him a righteous man. And according to the letter of the same law, God has the right to punish each of us for our unfaithfulness to God. But Joseph chooses differently, and so does God. They both choose mercy.

Sometimes mercy is the most righteous option. Sometimes mercy is the most *just* option. Who here has read the book *Just Mercy* or watched the film? *Just Mercy* is a memoir by attorney Bryan Stevenson. Mr. Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Institute<sup>1</sup> and has spent his career defending disadvantaged clients against systemic injustice in our judicial system. His clients are frequently poor people of color seeking to overturn wrongful convictions. Mr. Stevenson's most famous case was that of Walter McMillan, a black man wrongfully convicted of murdering a white woman in Alabama in 1986. Mr. McMillan suffered for years on death row until, with Mr. Stevenson's advocacy, his conviction was overturned. It was discovered that a key witness gave false testimony against Mr. McMillan under pressure from local law enforcement.

Mr. McMillan was a victim of a grave miscarriage of justice. A great many people felt themselves righteous in sentencing him to death row. But too often our sense of justice is distorted by our pride, greed, fear, and prejudice. Human justice is always at risk of being miscarried because human beings are imperfect. It is true that we need laws to help maintain order. But it is also true that when we value the letter of the law more highly than the humanity of our neighbors, that is not justice; that is injustice.

Joseph sensed that to do to Mary what the law allowed was not just or righteous because the punishment would strip her of her dignity and humanity. The more righteous choice was to choose a different way. And so, he resolved to quietly divorce her.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://eji.org/>

Except...Joseph's choice to spare Mary the death penalty, to even spare her the humiliation of a public divorce – while this choice was compassionate, it was also passive. Divorcing Mary would cost Joseph very little, but it would cost Mary a great deal. As an unmarried mother, she and her child would be shunned by society, cut off from the support of kin and community.

This is where God's justice intervenes. The angel of the LORD appears to Joseph in a dream and says, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for 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" (vv. 20-21).

God invites Joseph to move beyond his limited understanding of what is just and merciful, and instead do something previously unimaginable for him: Marry a woman pregnant out of wedlock and then adopt her child as his own. God asks Joseph to stand in solidarity with Mary rather than abandon her. God even gives Joseph the honor of bestowing Jesus' name, a name that signifies Jesus' essential purpose: "The LORD saves." God invites Joseph to share in the new thing that God is doing in and through Jesus. Because in Jesus God chooses a different way. Instead of punishing us for our sins, God saves us from our sins by becoming one of us. God chooses solidarity with God's people over the just punishment we deserve. God breaks God's own law to save us from ourselves.

Our artwork for this Sunday is called "The Courageous Choice" by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. In her artist's statement, Rev. Garrity writes, "What I find most interesting is that the angel doesn't command Joseph; instead he simply says, 'Don't be afraid.' He essentially says: 'Don't be afraid of the social stigma. Don't be afraid to become a parent through adoption. Don't be afraid to experience a love greater than you have ever known. Don't be afraid to make the courageous choice, the one that will not only change your life, but the lives of Mary and Jesus and so many generations who will come after you.'"<sup>2</sup>

Can we be brave like Joseph and choose a different way?

Most of us deeply desire to do the 'right thing.' As Christians, we look to Scripture and the tradition of the church for guidance on how to discern that right thing. We want to be counted among the righteous, to follow the law and will of God.

---

<sup>2</sup> Artist's statement. "The Courageous Choice" by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

And yet, at times we find ourselves in the same position as Joseph, where the letter of our religious and civil laws feels incompatible with the Law of Love that Jesus teaches. If we neglect the law and tradition, we will be accused (and may even accuse ourselves) of unrighteousness. This is particularly true in the church, where we seem to take great glee in policing each other's righteousness. Which church has the correct theology? Which church has sufficient faith in God's word? "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it" – as if we worship the words of God, rather than the Word of God that became flesh and gave us the keys to God's kingdom.

But Jesus teaches us that there is great joy in choosing a different way. He says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times...but I say to you" (Matthew 5-7). Jesus teaches us that we can set ourselves and our families, our neighbors and our communities free from the traditional cycles of injustice and punishment that keep us bound. We can set ourselves and future generations free into the vision that Isaiah proclaims in his prophecy: A world where the wilderness of our judgment will blossom, water breaks forth in the desert, eyes are opened, ears are unstopped, sorrow and sadness flee away. A world where we are reconciled with each other and with God in whole and healed relationship.

Joseph is a righteous man not because of his strict adherence to the law, but because of his orientation toward love and mercy. By his decision to obey the startling and unexpected command of God, he chooses the heart of the law instead of the letter. Right here, before Jesus is even born, Matthew is making clear what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. If we are going to follow Jesus, we have to weigh the prevailing understanding of God's commandments against the new thing that God is doing. The angel said to Joseph, "What is conceived in [Mary] is from the Holy Spirit" (v. 20). The Holy Spirit is always conceiving a new thing. Somehow, like Joseph, we must learn to trust the new thing God is doing, the new *way of being* God is calling us to. We must learn to listen to the voice of God and set aside our previous assumptions of God's will in favor of a new word from the God that saves. In this way we will come to know the higher righteousness that is God's kingdom and enter into the joy of the Lord.

Amen.