

The Love of a Father, The Love of a Son

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 12/23/18

I remember when I was seven years old, I inherited a new dad—also known as a stepdad. I didn't call him dad at first, but I remember there was a moment when my sister and I made the conscious decision to begin calling him "dad," not too many months after he moved in. He seemed almost relieved to hear the word leave our lips. I don't know how many of you grew up with a stepfather or perhaps even have served in that role before—but it is universally known that being a stepdad is one of the hardest positions to take within a traditional family unit. Think about it. You inherit kids from another man. You are never truly their father, and you will never be accepted as such, but you're often expected to play the part flawlessly: Give encouraging, fatherly advice at just the right time, exert the infamous fatherly discipline at the critical moment its needed, and to be the loving stalwart to your mate—as well as protector and provider perhaps. You will probably be treated with resentment most of the time by the kids, rarely if ever thanked, but you will love the children as your own because you love their mom. You will always have an unsettled pain in your gut because you will want to say those beautiful children are your own, but you hesitate when it comes up, because deep down you know though they are momentarily in your care, they truly belong to another. This is a fact you can never change, and something you are reminded of constantly by life's circumstances. There is no glory in this role, no comfort. It is simply done from a position of love. And though I called my own stepdad by the esteemed title of "dad," it was never lost on him that there was always another dad out there too. My "real dad." This made parenting at times complicated, for sure.

But can you imagine being Joseph, Jesus' stepdad? In light of the unusual circumstances of Jesus' conception, one thing we know for sure: Joseph isn't the actual father. Not at first, anyway. As we read the Christmas story, we read that Mary is betrothed to Joseph. In the culture of first century Jews, betrothal was marriage without consummation. Here you have a man in his thirties or forties, who had worked for twenty years or more to establish himself as a reputable carpenter, built his business, and had finally saved enough to marry. Though from a humble background, he still descends from a notable family at least in name. Their virtue, as is the culture of the Middle East dictates even today, especially for those of meager means, is everything. The same seems to be for Mary as well. Descendant from a good line, of a humble a family. She was young and beautiful. Their parents undoubtedly negotiated the marriage between them. Her virtue, that is her love for God, was an important part of the deal. Joseph and Mary accepted the terms and the wedding date set. Joseph must have been the happiest he had ever been. The celebration of his life's work through a sacred marriage was soon upon him. The dowry had been paid, expenses arranged for. Then he gets the news that his wife had been unfaithful, even before they completed their marriage process. This must have killed him inside. The shame it would bring on his family. Now, can you imagine how much worse it must have been for Mary, though? She couldn't hide her shame, like he could. He could find another wife down the road, however, she would never ever be able to find another husband. Having lived in the Middle East for seven years and traveled the region extensively I can attest that this taboo is still intact today. She would be shunned for her supposed "misdeed," and the baby shunned as well.

But Joseph was a good man. The best of men, I would say. Even before he had a dream spurring him on to action, he already had decided "to divorce her quietly" in hopes of sparing her more hardship than she would already have to bear. He was compassionate, even though in this culture he had been

“shamed” greatly and most certainly heartbroken about it. After prompted by angels to take Mary as his wife anyway and to raise her child as his own, he did not hesitate. He did it. And from what we see in Scripture, he did it very well. A man who had worked so hard to finally be able to afford a wife and kids, found himself with a wife pregnant with a child who was not his own, in a strange town (Bethlehem), homeless—without shelter. There is something particularly emasculating, gut wrenching, when a man—especially in the culture of the day—cannot provide at the very least shelter for his young family. And here we have Joseph, a stepfather in the direst of circumstances, unable to provide from the beginning. He doesn’t father the child; he can’t provide shelter and the baby is about to be born. He is truly a man at his brink. Then, the only shelter is a filthy barn. Yes, smelling of animal feces; this is where his wife gives birth. He surely was a man undone, humbled beyond belief, and it would not end there. Shortly after, while still in that small, strange place. He had to take his wife and his stepchild and flee for safety to Egypt. They arrived to country and culture they did not know, for what seems to be years. Yes, they were indeed refugees. Joseph was like the families crossing the high deserts to get to our country, risking life and limb to escape their circumstances. Arriving in Egypt without help, most likely homeless once again, Joseph surely felt like the worst provider every. Here, at least Mary had Joseph. Imagine the plight of the single mother!

We often think of Jesus’ compassionate nature descending from his Holy Father above, with little thought about his stepfather who raised him as his own. If you know anything about small villages and interlinked families, you know they love to gossip. Do you not think that the suspicious nature of Mary’s sudden pregnancy while apart from Joseph still, became a rumor that people would pass around throughout Jesus’ life. Do you think this incredible compassion that Jesus showed to the adulterous woman in John 8, when the men stood with stones in their hands and asked Jesus “should we not kill her as the law says?” or earlier in John 4 when Jesus observes that the Samaritan woman he quickly befriends at the well has had less than ideal domestic relationships with various men, but has no inkling within him to judge her AT ALL... do you not think that Jesus gained this incredible compassion from his humanly father first? The man who loved him and his mother with everything he had. Jesus had a real-life example all along. This love we often chalk up to something that exists far outside of our human ability but I tell you, no. It is in us. It has always been in us. Let it awaken. Let that love awaken. As Joseph demonstrated love as a father, and as Jesus would carry on in his love as a son, we too must carry on in the same unabashed, unashamed, relentless, radical, human love. Jesus said, “this new command I give you: Love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus loved humankind with everything had, including his very life. This is the love we must have for one another.

Carry on in this love. Amen.