

**LOVE IS THE GIFT OF CHRISTMAS**  
**MATTHEW 1:18-25**  
**JOHN 15:12-17**

This story from the gospel according to Matthew didn't really grab my attention as a young kid, or even as a late 20s seminary student. Of course, I'd read it, but it hadn't really captured my imagination until 2007 when a favorite indie band from Canada, The New Pornographers, put out a Christmas LP. (There's a story behind the band's name, but I won't get into that here and now.) One of the songs is called "Joseph, Who Understood", and I think the first time I heard it, I did what I always do when I listen to a song that sounds like it might change my life. I sat down, listening carefully, and proceeded to play it five times in a row and let it really sink in to my brain. The music is very much rock and roll, but the lyrics basically imagine what a conversation between Mary and Joseph might have sounded like from the perspective of the surprised carpenter from Bethlehem. The song acknowledges the shame Joseph might have endured as people whispered behind his back and stared as he walked by, and it recognizes the burden he might have felt realizing that Mary wasn't just carrying a baby, but a Messiah who was about to change and save the world.

Frankly, there's so little we know about Joseph. He is not mentioned nearly as much as Mary, and while he is a saint in the Roman Catholic Church, he is generally venerated far less. Of course, it's understandable that the young woman who found herself pregnant as a virgin and made the uncomfortable journey to Bethlehem, giving birth to the Christ child in a stable is looked upon with such reverence. But the song I just shared made me realize how infrequently we think about Joseph. We know from the text that once he found out about her pregnancy, he intended to cut Mary loose quietly, as he was a "righteous man" and knew the disgrace and even danger it could bring to her to go public. This in and of itself was a kind and loving thing to do in a culture that allowed much more heinous acts. But once the angel appeared in a dream, Joseph did exactly as he was commanded, and took Mary as his wife, and raised the child that she bore as his own.

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. Really think about his situation and how you might feel if you landed in it. Would you feel betrayed? Angry? Embarrassed? Jealous? Confused? Ultimately, while Joseph had a dream and the angel commanded him to stand by Mary and her baby, he could have made another choice. He could have acted in a different way. But Joseph was a devout Jewish man, and his faith had taught him to love God and love his neighbor. As the mid-

20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and civil rights activist Howard Thurman wrote, “Men do not love in general, but they love in particular. To love means dealing with persons in the concrete rather than the abstract. In the presence of love, there are no types or stereotypes, no classes and no masses...A person’s fact includes more than his plight, predicament, or need at a particular moment in time. It is something total which must include awareness of the person’s potential. This, too, is a part of the person’s fact. This is why love always sees more than is in evidence at any moment of viewing.” Joseph didn’t merely love in a general way, but put his pride aside and loved a particular pregnant young woman in a way that may have saved her life, and the life of her child. Given the historical context, this isn’t hyperbole.

The word isn’t used in the text, but the details of how Joseph chose to act in a truly difficult situation can only be described as love. Putting the well-being of another particular person in front of our own comfort is exactly what love does. Putting ourselves aside for the other is exactly what the grown-up Jesus went on to teach in his ministry in more instances that I can count, but one that comes quickly to mind is when he said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” In John 15:12-13. And that’s precisely what his father

Joseph did when presented with a fiancé who was pregnant without his participation. In a time when an unwed pregnant woman would have been incredibly vulnerable both financially and otherwise, Joseph acted with love, and lay down his life for his friend.

I think we know deep down inside that love is the whole point of Christmas. Gifts for our beloved family and friends, charitable giving to nonprofits dear to our hearts, plates of cookies from and for neighbors are just a few of the examples. Love isn't just a sentiment or the stuff of flowery platitudes, but a wide range of actions that we humans can take. As the carol sung this morning so clearly states, "Love is the gift of Christmas", and receiving it means not hoarding it or locking it away to preserve it, but sharing it liberally and fully in whatever spaces or relationships we stumble into, or inhabit on a regular basis.

Love is hard to define, but we know it when we see it, don't we? The unusual story of an adolescent mother giving birth in a stable after being turned away from an inn isn't why we are captivated. Nor is it because the shepherds heard about it from angels, or that wise men from the East went to pay homage. After all, these are details from two different gospel accounts, and Mark and John don't mention the birth narrative at all. But, what we see throughout each of the four gospels in their own ways is the message of love Jesus shared; love through acts

of compassion, calls for justice, and movements towards peace. Jesus, the person who not only talked about love, but enacted it is the reason we are still reading his story two thousand years later, and why we feel compelled to respond to his invitation when he says, "Follow me." The birth of Jesus, while certainly a meaningful and beautiful part of our scriptures is not the singular reason we celebrate Christmas, but because Jesus grew to lead us and teach us in the ways of love through his parables, healings, and miracles. He is the message, and the message is love. A message we are invited to be part of, too.

We stand at the beginning of a blessed new year. It might just be that we have never been more grateful to turn the page in our calendars. 2020 was filled with the global Covid-19 pandemic, the spotlight on our nation's long held systemic racial injustice, a contentious presidential election, and myriad other losses and road blocks that we could not have imagined a year ago. But, if we are not changed by the events of 2020, if we do not choose to live differently because of our collective experience, it's just a new year with the same old tired platitudes and attitudes. What we learn from the story of Joseph today is that when faced with the unimaginable, we can run the other way, or we can lay down our unmet expectations and plans for a friend, that we can indeed choose to love one another as we have been loved by the One who came to live among us because

God so loved the world. Granted, 2020 was an especially difficult year, and none of us were prepared to live through a pandemic, but difficulty always has and always will be part of the human experience, and what we have control over is how we respond in any given situation. As the Holocaust survivor and renowned psychiatrist Viktor Frankl wrote, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” We are free to respond out of fear, and we are free to respond out of love, as Joseph did. I’ll go out on a limb here and suggest that decisions rooted in love bring us much more of what and who we want in our lives than any decision made out of fear.

So, what will 2021 look like for us? What will it look like for us to share the radical love Jesus brought through his birth and later described, that Joseph enacted? As the pandemic continues, there will surely be countless opportunities to love one another through phone calls, wearing our masks, learning about racial injustice and income inequality, finding creative ways to stay connected while staying safe, being mindful of the strain this all puts on our mental health, and embracing this strange pause in the machine of productivity and learning to love with abandon. As Wendell Berry wrote in his beautiful poem *Wild Geese*, “Geese appear high over us, pass, and the sky closes. Abandon, as in love or sleep, holds

them in their way, clear in the ancient faith: what we need is here. And we pray, not for new earth or heaven, but to be quiet in heart, and in eye, clear. What we need is here.” The opportunity of this time and place is to be fully, lovingly present in this time and place.

The mystery of love is that it makes difficult tasks and experiences easier; it lightens burdens, and shifts our vision for what is possible. That’s why love is the subject of nearly every great song, sacred and secular alike. What is the gift of this Christmastime, of this celebration of the birth of a baby more than 2,000 years ago who went on to show us how to bring light to the world, of Joseph’s very human model of compassion, of a God who consistently finds a way out of no way? A love that moves the needle for what is possible. My favorite part of the song from Joseph’s perspective I described at the beginning of this sermon is the subtle shift of the refrain. Several times the refrain is Joseph declaring, “You’re asking me to believe too many things”, but by the end, Joseph says, “You’re asking me to believe so many things.” As I see it, love has made something unfathomably difficult not easy, but possible. That’s the gift of Christmas now, too. Love makes the pandemic, our march towards racial justice, and any other challenge we face not easy, but possible. THAT is the wonder of love. Amen.