

Love a Family Member

12-16-2012

Matthew 1: 18-25

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us." 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

One of the best parts of the Christmas holidays is being together with family. Do you know what one of the worst parts of the Christmas holidays is; being together with family members? It would be a funny statement, if it wasn't such a true one. Unfortunately, Christmas is the time of year when all the imperfections we bring to the family table are difficult to digest. The problem is, we know each other too well. And yet, we don't really know enough about what accounts for our families aggravating tendencies to be as forgiving as we should. Or even to give them the forgiveness they deserve. All too often, we are so stressed out by all the holiday expectations we develop tunnel vision and see only ourselves and our own wants and needs. It becomes easy to neglect and find fault with family because of all we have on our plates. Maggie and I had an unpleasant discussion several weeks ago and it all revolved around the business of the season. We each had so much on our plates, we each were being pulled in different directions, how about you come with me to this, or how about you go to that with me, or I need to go here and you need to go there... Neither of us could catch our breath, and I was a little ugly to Maggie. By the end of the day, we both sat down, she with her planner and me at the computer with both of my calendars and we tried to get on the same page. Family is just too important not to do that. At Christmas, we each are given the unique gift to consider how much our family figures into our lives. And, we are offered an opportunity to make appropriate adjustments if necessary. In the end, aside from God, family is all we have.

In Matthew chapter 1, we are given a peek at a participant who had not enlisted in God's divine plan, but he had been drafted. I'm talking about Joseph. If you would, for just a moment, put yourself in his carpenter's sandals. It had to be just a little tough on him. Here was a guy who was no stranger to disappointment. Even though he could trace his ancestry to Israel's most celebrated king, Joseph did not live in the shadow of the palace. In fact, he didn't live anywhere near Jerusalem. Obviously, some 2,000 years later, we all know where Joseph was from. He was from Nazareth. First century people in and around Galilee knew all about the little towns of their region. Nazareth was one of those little towns and was considered a blue-collar town. A town from the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak. So, what was Joseph, a man from the lineage of David, doing living in Nazareth? Good question. The Jews in Nazareth were extremely devout, extremely conservative, and they followed the letter of the Jewish law. Joseph is a carpenter, trying to make a living in this little town. Thus his dilemma; what does he do about Mary? You heard the scripture this morning. You know it so well you probably skipped right over the difficulty of the decision Joseph had to make. His fiancé, Mary, was found to be with child. That is a very politically correct way of saying she was pregnant. And her explanation of how that happened was almost impossible to believe. I can almost hear Joseph now: You mean to tell me you've been talking to an angel, right? And this angel has told you that an embryo is just going to show up in your womb without the necessary act that results in pregnancy? And I'm supposed to believe that? And what, the father of this baby is who? You really expect me to believe God Almighty is the father? How gullible do you really think I am? Just how in the world did you come up with such a story in the first place? It's hard enough to accept that my fiancé is pregnant with someone else's baby. Come on, don't try to hide the truth from me.

I would think that to be a pretty natural reaction, wouldn't you? Of course it was; how else would Joseph have handled the news. But in spite of his doubt and obvious spiraling emotions, Joseph didn't mistreat Mary. Verse 19 says that Joseph was a righteous man. That means his life had been shaped by the transforming touch of God. His character had been fingerprinted by the touch of God. So his motives, although human and imperfect, were not self-centered but triggered by the needs of others. As a result, Joseph did not think about embarrassing Mary. He just wouldn't do that; He loved her too much, even though he didn't really believe her story about who the father of her child was supposed to be. Being pregnant and unmarried could have caused her some serious problems. By Jewish law, he could have had her stoned to death. Or, by the same token, according to Jewish law, he could break it off and divorce her from his engagement. That is what Joseph had planned to do, break-off the engagement. He was working very hard to build up his reputation as a carpenter. With Nazareth being as conservative and law abiding as it had the reputation of being, a scandal of this nature would ruin Joseph and any hope he had of making a living in the future. So his plan was to divorce her very quietly. Her life would be spared and his reputation kept intact. But, you know, God has a way of doing things. As Joseph was preparing to put his plan in motion, God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream. Listen to verses 20 and 21 again: **But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."** Wow, Mary wasn't making this whole thing up. There was really an angel; an angel had just spoken to Joseph too. The entire episode had just taken on an entirely different meaning. Mary was actually going to give birth to the Son of God. Listen to verse 24: **When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.** Joseph wasn't a super-spiritual man, but as the scriptures said, he was a righteous one. And like you and I, he truly loved the ones he was closest to. Joseph placed Mary, the woman he loved, the woman he wanted to be his wife ahead of himself, ahead of his business, and ahead of what the people of the town of Nazareth may have thought of him. The angel of the Lord told Joseph to put his family first. And he did.

It should be pretty evident that I'm not an angel of the lord, but I'm going to ask you to do the same thing the angel asked Joseph to do. This Christmas season, put your family first. Put it ahead of your work, your reputation, and your deadlines. Put it ahead of all the business of the season. Put your family first. Christmas traditionally is a family time. The kids' excitement with the season is contagious. Their imaginations and the anticipation that results, sparkle as brightly as the lights we hang on our Christmas trees. We shop for sons and daughters and nieces and nephews and grandchildren because no one delights in getting presents at Christmas like children. But Christmas is not just a family-centered holiday because of children. It is all about the rest of your family as well. It's about celebrating the joys of marriage against the backdrop of "Joy to the World" playing on the CD player. Husbands and wives consciously look for just the right gift to convey the emotional contentment that is part of the lifetime commitment made to each other. Brothers and sisters, Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are part of Christmas too. We need to be careful to include the entire family. We are not isolated persons living in a vacuum. We all belong to those who claim a common name or a common past. Where would we be at Christmas without family?

The example we see set by Joseph in our scripture lesson this morning challenges us to not just look out for our own interest, but to look out for the interest of those who call us family. During the Christmas season, with the busy schedules we all have, it is easy to forget to show love to our families. Not on purpose mind you, it just seems to happen. Maybe we take our families for granted. Without meaning to, it's very easy to unconsciously tell ourselves, oh, that is just my wife, I'll spend time with her tomorrow, or it is my son, I'll go to the next ball game he plays in or I'll go to my daughter's next dance recital. And with our busy lives, we just don't get there. Perfect example: I'm the guilty party. I have a brother who lives in Cornelius. I love Jimmy to death. I keep up with his post on Facebook; we talk on the phone three or four times a year (we call each other on our birthdays and maybe once or twice in between). But, that's about it. He moved into a new house about two years ago. I haven't seen it yet. I haven't seen him in at least that long. I'm not mad or even upset with him over anything. Nor he upset with me. It's just... well, I'm busy and he's busy. I guess we both just sort of take each other for granted. Jim's my brother, he will always be there, I hope. Nancy is my sister. We live so close to each other, if Gene sneezes in his backyard, I say bless you. Then again so do the people three counties over. Sadly, if Nancy and I didn't come to the same church, we might not see each other for a month at a time. Nothing wrong

between us; I love her very much. We're all just so busy, all too often, we don't slow down long enough to even say hello. It's not just Nancy, Jimmy and me. I'd be willing to bet, each of you have family members you haven't communicated with in a while. Some of you have family members you haven't spoken to or seen in a while. This Christmas, let's change that. Let's make the time for family. Let's put the job on hold. Let's slow down the business. Spend some quality time with your family. Send an email; send a card; make that phone call; drive that extra mile. If there is a fence that needs mending, be the bigger person, start the mending process.

As we go through this Christmas season, I would ask you to remember Joseph and remember his actions. Remember the young woman he was engaged to marry and the extraordinary love Joseph showed to her. Remember the son who was not his, and how he raised him as his own. Remember who this child really was and that we are celebrating his lowly birth and what His birth has meant to mankind. And last but not least, I want each of you to remember that we are all members of the family of God. As you love family members, don't just love those who happen to be blood related, reach out to those who may be less fortunate than you. Reach out to someone who may not have a family close by. Invite them over to your house. Share your family, your love and God's love with them this Christmas. Yes, Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, a celebration of the birth of the One who loved us so much that He gave His life that we may each live through Him.