

This morning, we are continuing our message series called Gathered Around the Manger by looking at rarely talked about member of the group...Joseph. It is one of the few times in Scripture, or all of history really, where the primary male figure has such a hidden and unspoken role...and yet his decisions and his influence are written all over this story and the life of Jesus.

Imagine if you were Joseph. You are religious, God-fearing, and a morally upright man. People in the community have come to respect you as an honest man who pays his bills and works for a fair price. You are becoming a well-respected leader in the community. You have worked for years to rise to this place in your life.

It comes time, as is the custom, for you to take a wife; so you and your family work to arrange a wedding. You find a nice family who's daughter is known for her obedience to God, her upright life, and simplicity. Not just a good person, but a woman known for her faithfulness to God. She is going to be the perfect wife.

So you go through the year long process of planning, preparing, and negotiating toward a marriage. Things are going very well...until...until this godly woman is discovered to be pregnant.

Now, you know it isn't your child. You haven't touched her. You have been faithful to your vows and to the covenant you made before God...and she has done something that, according to the Old Testament Law, deserved death.

At the same time, Joseph is a genuinely good man. He is a "righteous man;" which means more than just being a good person. It means he is a man who has made it the direction of his life to be obedient to God and to please this God he loves and who loves him. His actions tell us just how good he really is!

Matthew 1:18-19 says

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. 19 And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

By putting her away "quietly" Joseph was taking a big hit. See, in this culture, the groom would give this large sum of money to the bride's family as part of the marital covenant. It was a dowry paid to compensate the family for the work lost due to the girl's absence from the family.

And putting her away quietly, Joseph is refusing to make her a spectacle, refusing to point out her "sinfulness" in front of the community, and He is forfeiting his ability to reclaim the dowry he had paid to the family. He knows how much she will be ridiculed and shunned by the rest of the community, and this "righteous man" willingly walks away rather than cause her more suffering.

Joseph refuses to add more shame to the situation.

What an amazing thing to do! What a lesson for us to learn in this day and age...where every flaw, screw up and embarrassing moment of a person's life shows up on the internet to haunt them forever, often even destroying their lives.

And it is tempting for many of us take part in that culture of shaming and gossip...to share the articles on Facebook, to talk about them, to repeat them over and over and over without once checking to see if they are true and without once giving this person the slightest bit of benefit of the doubt.

Over Christmas break in 2013, 30 year old Justine Sacco boarded a flight to Africa to see her family and do some volunteer work. She 170 followers on her Twitter account.

In an effort to make a satirical and sarcastic commentary on the way some in America respond to Africa, she tweets:

“Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!”

Probably not the best thing to tweet, but when taken with the understanding that she is making satirical commentary on what some people think about Africa, it is at least understandable.

Earlier this year she was interviewed about it, 'I thought there was no way that anyone could possibly think it was literal. Unfortunately, I am not a character on 'South Park' or a comedian, so I had no business commenting on the epidemic in such a politically incorrect manner on a public platform...Living in America puts us in a bit of a bubble when it comes to what is going on in the third world. I was making fun of that bubble.'¹

One stupid mistake, but by the time she landed 11 hours later...she was media sensation...in the worst kind of way.

Some reporter happened across it, connected it with where she worked, and spun it making her look like a horrible racist person...by the time she stepped off the plane her twitter account had accumulated THOUSANDS of followers, her employer had fired her, and people were waiting at the airport in Africa to be the first to snap a picture of her once she landed.

Joseph refused to add to the shame of a young girl who was about to face some very difficult circumstances.

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2955322/Justine-Sacco-reveals-destroyed-life-racist-tweet-trip-Africa.html#ixzz3uCKzZbkW>

We think we are so great, but we live a culture that thrives on shame, and shaming other people. And if we are not careful, we can get sucked into it as well...Joseph reminds us that how we respond to the shaming culture tells more about us than it does about the person being shamed. When we take part in the shaming and the gossip...we revel in the idea of adding condemnation to a person...we take delight in another person's downfall; even the downfall of someone we don't like...we have a heart issue.

How many times have we gotten angry, and rather than discussing the issue...attacked the person's character or support rumors and perpetuated untruth about people with whom we don't agree?

How many time have we added to the shame a person already feels for their actions by our compulsive need to give our opinion about what they have done...rather than offer them hope and forgiveness?

Joseph reminds us that those who follow after God...those who desire to live out the righteousness that God requires of us...are people who do not add to the shame and guilt people already have...

But Joseph doesn't stop there...

Matthew 1:20-25

20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." 22 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us." 24 And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, 25 but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

Not only did Joseph refuse to take part in adding shame to Mary...

Joseph took her shame on himself.

Remember Joseph is probably close to 30, standard age for a male to marry. He has had time to build a business, make some money, earn a good reputation. He is known by those in the town as a "righteous man" who obeys God...and by taking Mary home as he is wife...he is accepting responsibility for this unplanned, out-of-wedlock child.

He saying, with his actions, this child is mine. I accept every stigma and disbelieving stare. I know others are going to call me all sorts of horrible names and accuse me of something I have not done.

And let's be honest...no one would believe this story about angelic visitors and Holy Spirit impregnation. Maybe Zechariah and Elizabeth because of the way things happened for them with John's birth. But no one is going to believe this outrageous story when the more obvious answer is that Joseph and Mary simply get ahead of themselves and caved sexually. Now, for the rest of their lives, they are branded.

So as Joseph stands in the presence of the angel confronted with a choice that, in the eyes of everyone he knows is going to make him a sinner and anything but a righteous man...Joseph accepts what is ahead. Out of his obedience to God he stands with Mary in the oppression and abuse that is hurled her way.

We live in challenging times...where men and woman are willing to heap shame and abuse on others and call it the judgment of God or "simply stating the truth" and then blast those who stand up for the love of God as being weak or misrepresenting the Gospel.

We live in a time where abuse of others who are different is equally rejected and accepted by the same groups of people...depending on who they like and when they are asked. And being part of the Church doesn't help because there can be more people in the Church committed to the American Way or their own sense of truth and justice or their own "logic and reason" than there are people committed to sacrificially following in the steps of Jesus Christ. We, as Jesus' followers are called to take the shame and rejection onto ourselves and defend and love them.

Just as Joseph refused to heap on more shame...Just as Joseph sided with Mary in her shame and took that shame on himself...Jesus sided with us, refused to heap on more shame, and takes out shame and guilt and sin on himself...so we can be free and forgiven.

Philippians 2:5-8

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Being a Christian isn't simply about being forgiven of our sins and going to heaven when we die...being a Christian means we recognize that Jesus is the way...the way

we should act, the character we should have, the attitudes we should take...Jesus's life is the pattern for living everyone of us should strive for...And we forget that Jesus was human. He had many years with Joseph as his father, and I believe that Joseph's example of not heaping shame on someone influenced the way Jesus approached the woman caught in adultery who was about to be stoned. I believe Joseph's example influenced the way Jesus led his life. Joseph was a righteous man who obeyed God and it really is a shame we don't have more about him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor who resisted what he saw developing within Nazism and Hitler's politics. He saw the way people were treating the Jews and others who didn't "fit" in normal society. He saw how they were blamed for everything wrong in the country, and resisted...Because of this his he was labeled an enemy of the state and his life was in danger; so he left for the United States to avoid being imprisoned or killed.

But after some thought, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to continue defending the Gospel and working to rescue those being attacked by Hitler. Because he refused to leave those who remained without someone. He believe that if he wasn't there with them in their shame, he had no right to come back to help them rebuild and recover.

He said,

"Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God's will. We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

Within a few weeks of returning to Germany, Bonhoeffer was arrested and put in a concentration camp where he worked to encourage and lead those who were suffering. He was hanged a year and a half later, just days before the camp was liberated, but the writing he left remind me a lot how Joseph acted.

Joseph saw the purpose of his faith as actively obeying the directives of God...so when he was faced with the option to shame someone who had hurt him deeply, at first, he rejected it and tried to protect her, and then, in obedience to God, he took her shame upon himself.

A few months ago, I was challenged by a statement... Never judge someone until they know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you love them unconditionally.