

December 19, 2004  
Matthew 1:18-25  
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### “The Forgotten Guardian of Christmas”

As a child at Christmastime, I liked looking at the gifts under the tree and imagining what was in each one. I have to admit that the largest, most beautifully wrapped packages were particularly tempting. I tended to spend less time contemplating the contents of the small, more plain looking presents. (Although I'm sure I shook them all!) Yet, these neglected packages may have held the most special gifts.

So it is with the Christmas story. We seldom talk about Joseph, the father of Jesus, who is one of the most overlooked gifts of Christmas. There are countless famous renderings of Mary and Jesus, but few equally famous portraits of Joseph and Jesus. In Renaissance art, it is not uncommon to see Joseph as an older man with a gray beard and balding head, while Mary is full of youthful grace and spiritual vitality. Even the angels, shepherds and Wise Men get more attention than Joseph. In some Christmas pageants, Joseph doesn't even get a speaking part. Yet, according to Matthew, this ordinary man, faced with a difficult situation, has much to teach us about faithfulness to God. He is the forgotten guardian of Christmas.

Matthew describes Joseph with a carefully chosen word. Joseph is “righteous.” Joseph is a good person who tries to do what is right in the eyes of God and what is fair to his neighbors. We are careless about how we use the word “good.” To the Jewish people, righteousness is not a word to be carelessly tossed about like so much salad. To say that Joseph is righteous is to say that Joseph keeps the law of God with no deviation.

This righteous man is in a morally troubling and potentially embarrassing situation. Mary, his betrothed, is with child. He knows the child is not his. According to the law, a righteous man could have sent Mary back to her parents in disgrace or even stoned her at the door of her parents' house. Joseph tempers his righteousness with mercy. He resolves to break the engagement quietly in order to spare her any public disgrace. Joseph understands that the heart of the law is mercy. True righteousness is not primarily a matter of coloring within the lines or avoiding the cracks. True righteousness is a matter of the heart. True righteousness sees beneath the letter of the law, the merciful, life-giving purposes of God.

We all know people who follow the letter of the law but do not understand the heart of the law. Such people live in a world in which everything is either black or white with no room for gray. Living in fear of doing the wrong thing, they seldom do anything. They are devoid of compassion with no appreciation for extenuating circumstances. In Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, Inspector Jabert spends his life pursuing Jean Valjean for the crime of breaking parole after stealing bread to feed his sister's hungry family. Jabert is devoted to carrying out the letter of the law. He has

no concept of mercy. In the end he destroys himself because he cannot reconcile his notion of justice with the mercy Valjean shows him.

The law in the Bible is not an end in itself. It is a guide to help us discern God's actions in the world. The law is to help us be more loving, forgiving, fair and free. One reason Jesus is so hard on the Pharisees is because they trade their freedom to live a joyful life of loving service to God for a set of rules that they think will keep their noses clean. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." If you measure your life by how well you keep the letter of the law, you can't do better than the Pharisees. Jesus is looking for a different type of righteousness—the righteousness of faith.

Through an angel, God speaks to Joseph in a dream. God tells Joseph to do something that runs counter to everything he thinks is right to do. God asks Joseph to step outside the letter of the law in order to fulfill the deeper purposes of the law. No matter what the neighbors think or what the law says he should do, Joseph takes Mary to be his wife, Joseph listens to the angel. He believes God. Joseph discovers the grace that is found at the heart of the law. Joseph shows us that true righteousness not only takes faith but also the courage to act on faith. It takes courage to go against the tide of public opinion or swim against the stream of popular culture. Joseph's willingness to take a risk paves the way for the birth of Jesus. In his quiet, unassuming, courageous way, Joseph becomes the guardian of Christmas.

Joseph shows us the higher righteousness of faith. By listening for God we too may become guardians of the surprising things God is doing in our world. It takes courageous faith to stand up for the poor, the oppressed and the outcast in our society. It takes persistent faith to teach our children and grandchildren the difference between right and wrong, the meaning of service, the practice of compassion, the daily life of prayer and kindness to kids that are different from them. Too often God speaks, but we cover our ears. God touches life all around us, but we don't see it because we put our blinders on. God taps us on the shoulder, ready to empower our hearts and touch our lives with grace, but we explain all these things away. We have our plans and we don't make much room in our lives for God's plans.

Listen as God speaks to you in prayer. Prayer is not giving God a list of things we want in the same way we might give a list to Santa Claus. Prayer is more about listening than speaking. God speaks to us through others. Other people are not pawns on our chessboard, but vessels of God's spirit and God's grace. God speaks to us through the Bible. We read the Bible to know who God is and what God wants. God's voice will lead us to those things that are life giving, redemptive, holy, community building, compassionate and kind. When we know what God wants, we cannot help but change our plans and take the risk of doing God's will.

The faithful guardians of Christmas are those who have the courage to do what God demands. Over the years, I have noticed how the faithful tend to work somewhere off

stage. You know them through their simple acts of grace, courage and kindness. Like Joseph, they do not receive much recognition. They simply listen to God and carry out their normal activities with faith and courage. They care for a friend in trouble; they see their daily work as their service to Christ; they pack boxes or wrap packages or deliver the gifts for Christmas Benevolence; they help a child they didn't know learn to read; they feed a hungry family; they stand up for what is right; and they hold a dying stranger's hand in a nursing home. In all these ways, they guard Christmas all through the year.