

December 17, 2006  
Genesis 37:1-11, Matthew 1:18-25  
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

"Daring to Dream"

When Christmas gifts are being exchanged, we are often drawn to the largest, most beautifully wrapped packages. We tend to overlook the small, plain looking presents. I guess it is human nature. Yet, these neglected packages may hold the most special gifts. So it is with the Christmas story. We seldom talk about Joseph, the father of Jesus, who may be one of the most overlooked gifts of Christmas. We always seem to turn our attention to Mary. Artists picture Mary as a serene, beautiful young girl at the center of the Christmas drama. There are countless famous renderings of the Madonna and child, but few, if any, equally famous portraits of father and son. In the renaissance paintings of the nativity, it is not uncommon to see Joseph as an older man with a gray beard and balding head, while Mary's image 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. Joseph is the overlooked gift of Christmas.

The situation is due in part to the fact that our Christmas celebrations are shaped more by Luke's account of the birth of Jesus than by Matthew's story. Luke makes Mary the central figure of the story. Matthew takes a different approach. In Matthew, the attention is on Joseph. What will Joseph do when he finds out that Mary is going to have a baby? Joseph, not Mary, dominates the action that follows. This ordinary man, faced with a difficult situation, has much to teach us about faithfulness to God.

Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man. Matthew chooses the word with care. Joseph is what we might call a "good" person who tries to do what is right in the eyes of God and what is fair to his neighbors. We are so casual about how we use the word "good." To the Jewish people, righteousness is the goal of human life. It is not a word to be carelessly tossed about like so much salad. To be righteous is to keep the covenant. For the Jews, the guide to righteousness is the Torah, the law or the books of Moses. To be righteous is to keep the law.

This just man finds himself in a troublesome, immoral and potentially embarrassing situation. Mary, his betrothed, is with child. Since they have not yet completed the marriage rituals and established a home together as husband and wife, he knows the child is not his. Now, according to the law, Mary could have been sent back in disgrace to her parents or even stoned at the door of her parents' house. Joseph tempers his righteousness with mercy. He resolves to break the engagement quietly. He wants to spare her public disgrace. Joseph understands that the heart of the law is mercy.

At the very beginning of the gospel, Matthew is opening our eyes to see a new understanding of righteousness that a grown up Jesus will embody in his life. True righteousness is not primarily a matter of coloring within the lines or not breaking the rules.

True righteousness is a matter of a merciful heart. True righteousness sees beneath the letter of the law to 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 of right and wrong. They are devoid of compassion and have no appreciation for extenuating circumstances. Everything is black or white; there is no room for gray. Such people miss the deeper purposes of God. Sometimes, we are such people. We have a hard time ever admitting that we are wrong; we only see the faults and failures of others. We use rules to justify ourselves and condemn others. Such attitudes only lead us to a false self-righteousness, not to the true righteousness that comes from God. Jesus was hard on the Pharisees of his day because they trusted in their own goodness. At bottom, self-righteous people hide behind the cloak of goodness because they are afraid that someone will see their own inadequate hearts. Victor Hugo's great literary creation, Inspector Javert, spends his life pursuing John Valjean for the crime of breaking parole after stealing bread to feed his sister's hungry family. Javert has no concept of justice as mercy. The righteousness of Joseph comes from a humble heart that depends upon the mercy of God. Righteousness is not so much about being right as it is about being merciful.

Joseph teaches us something else about the nature of true righteousness. Joseph is not only a good man; he is also a man who listens for God. After Joseph determines what to do, God speaks to Joseph through the voice of an angel in a dream. God tells Joseph to do something that runs counter to everything Joseph thinks is right. God tells Joseph to step outside the letter of the law in order to fulfill the deeper purposes of the law. Sometimes, I wonder how Joseph knows that it is, indeed, the voice of God and not some other voice. Perhaps, it is because the angel tells what God will accomplish by Joseph taking Mary to be his wife. The baby Jesus will grow to become the one to save the people from their sins. The name Jesus means, "God saves." The angel tells Joseph to do something dramatically new and unconventional; yet, the angel's instructions will fulfill an ancient prophecy of God. God will accomplish great things if Joseph listens and believes. What appears to go against the letter of the law will bring life to God's people.

This is not the first Joseph to have a holy dream. This is not the first Joseph to believe that God can do great things when we believe the dream. Two thousand years before, another Joseph dreamed some pretty strange dreams. This first Joseph was not a mature man, but a spoiled and overindulged young man. He was the son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. He was beloved by his father and hated by his brothers. Joseph dreamed that he and his brothers were binding sheaves of grain in a field and all the other sheaves bowed before his sheaf. Then he dreamed that the sun, the moon and eleven stars bowed before him. The meaning of the dreams was obvious and his brothers hated him all the more. Joseph, the son of Jacob, would have to go through a whole lot of hard knocks before he would understand the dreams. He was sold into slavery, arrested in Egypt and thrown into prison. In spite of it all, he rose to become the Prime Minister in Pharaoh's court. His capacity to dream and to understand dreams led him to save Egypt and his family from starvation in a time of famine. This first Joseph learned how to listen, to believe and to imagine the wonderful things that God can do.

Both Josephs dare to dream. They give us the gift of learning how to listen for God. God speaks; but we cover ears. God touches life all around us; but we don't see anything because we are busy pushing ahead with our blinders on. God taps us on the shoulder, empowers our hearts and touches our lives with grace; but we explain all these things away. We are set on accomplishing our agendas and we don't make much room in our lives for God's plans. It is important to listen for God. Listen as God speaks to us in prayer. Prayer is something more than taking God a list of things we want - like a list for Santa Claus. Prayer is quietness and listening. God speaks to us through others. Other people are not objects for us to use, but vessels of God's Spirit and God's grace. God speaks to us through the Bible. We read the Bible to know what God promises and what God wants. God's voice will lead us to those things that are life giving, redemptive, holy, community building, compassionate and kind. God will not tell us to do something that is contrary to what we know of God in Jesus Christ. When we know it is the voice of God, then we cannot help but change our plans in order to do what God wants.

Joseph takes Mary to be his wife. Joseph teaches us that a righteous person is a courageous person. A righteous person may even appear to others as an unconventional person. How can it be otherwise, when God is bringing new things into being through those who dare to dream? It takes courage to go against the tide of public opinion or swim against the stream of popular culture. When we listen for God and do what God wants, that is precisely where God is going to take us. It takes courage to live for God today. I don't mean that it takes any special courage to have your name on the membership roll of some church or to say publicly that you are a Christian. I mean it takes courage to live like a Christian in your family, with your friends, in your business and in the community. It takes fortitude to teach your children the difference between right and wrong, the meaning of service, the practice of compassion, the protection of the weak, the daily life of prayer and kindness to kids that are different from them. It takes courage to stand up for the poor, the oppressed, the elderly and the outcast in our society. It takes fortitude to give generously and sacrificially to the causes of God when our culture is constantly tempting us to buy stuff we don't need so we can mask the hunger with things. Many people spend so much energy trying to fit in the "right" crowd. God is not interested in the right crowd. God is interested in righteousness.

It is going to take a lot of courage to be good in a culture that is consumed with "goodies," but not engaged with God. Joseph dares to dream. In listening to the dream, Joseph shows us what it means to live for God. On Christmas Day, many of us will gather with family and friends to unwrap our gifts. Whether you are in a boisterous crowd of pre-schoolers and teenagers or in a quiet room alone, I pray that you will take a moment to see the extraordinary Christmas gift of an ordinary man named Joseph, the dreamer who dares to dream the dreams of God.