

THE OVERLOOKED DISCIPLE

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19
Matthew 1:18-25

Faith Community
December 23, 2007

Introduction

There was a time, in a previous church, when I was upset about what was going on in the education program. We weren't getting a good response even though we offered great programs and a number of other things were going on. I don't even remember now.

The more these concerns rolled around in my head, the more upset and frustrated I got. (You know how when you're upset you have those conversations with yourself, imagining what other people would say, and the whole thing just gets worse.) It can be something little and we make it into something huge – the molehill into mountain effect!

That afternoon I was scheduled to meet with an elderly woman who wasn't homebound, but really enjoyed having visitors. I went and spent time with her. She talked about her life, reflected on her years, and commented on current events. She was one of those wise, calm people who are able to put life into perspective.

I didn't say a word about what I was stewing about, but I left her home much calmer and less frustrated. Just her presence and her wisdom, helped me put my worries in perspective. She was not one of the dynamic leaders in the church. She wasn't outspoken. She didn't have even a hint of arrogance about her. She was calm and faithful.

I

We meet a person like that in today's scripture. For the most part he is overlooked, but he is strong, quiet, and devout. He never draws attention to himself, but so much of Christmas depends on him. He is Joseph, of course. He is the man in the crèche scene kneeling on one knee looking into the baby's eyes. Or he may be standing with a crook in his hand leading the donkey with Mary and the baby as they head to Egypt for safety. He's like a prop in the story. The house lights are focused on Mary and the baby; he's standing off to one side, out of the circle of light. As I was preparing this I noticed that one of our nativity scenes at home doesn't even have a Joseph in it! It's one thing that there is no Joseph – it's another that for all these years I didn't even notice! That would never happen with Mary or the baby, of course, and it wouldn't happen with the wise men either – there have to be three of them.

Joseph is the Best Supporting Actor, who has no lines! In Matthew's gospel, Joseph doesn't speak one word.

One pastor told of the children's Christmas pageant at their church. Just minutes before the play was to begin the director came running down the hall of the church. "We have no Joseph!" she said. Apparently the child who was to play Joseph came down with a stomach ailment just before they left for the church (stage fright maybe?). His mother had just called to say that he wasn't going to be able to play his part. "We don't have a Joseph!" the director the director cried again.

The pastor said, “Don’t worry, it will be alright. Just take one of the shepherds and have him stand right next to the manger and look down at the baby. Joseph doesn’t have any lines, does he?” “No.” Then it will be fine. Joseph is the replaceable figure – any shepherd can fill his spot. Someone has Joseph is the Rodney Dangerfield of the Christmas story.

But don’t underestimate him. He may be quiet, but he is strong. He is the person you want with you when you are really in a bind. He doesn’t draw attention to himself, but he is the one who makes things happen. He is the one who works behind the scenes. He may not be flashy, but he is important.

II

Don’t you know people like that? They are strong, quiet people who get things done. They aren’t out front – they almost never take a bow – but they work behind the scenes faithfully.

It has been my privilege to work in churches with people like Joseph. Their strength is seen not just in their actions, but often in their presence. They exude calm; not much seems to rattle them. They never complain. If you want to make sure something is done right, you ask them to do it. If you publicly acknowledge them they’ll probably stare at their feet and have a look on their face like they have a bad case of indigestion.

III

Joseph may be silent, but he is able to deal with very difficult situation. He is betrothed to Mary. Our translation today says he was engaged, which is n’t quite accurate. To be betrothed means that a woman is “bound” to a man. Formal words of consent were stated, although it was often an arranged marriage. Usually the woman was young when this happened, sometimes in her pre-teens. She didn’t live with the man yet, but everyone understood that she was his wife. It could be several years before she left her parents’ home, got married and moved in with her husband.

This is where we find Mary – somewhere after her betrothal to Joseph, and before they were married. It is here that Mary tells Joseph that she’s pregnant. Imagine Joseph’s feelings when he finds out the woman he is betrothed to is pregnant by someone else! Mary is in danger; Joseph could do anything from making a spectacle of her to having her put to death. His honor has been shamed.

But Joseph is a righteous man. He’s a quiet, strong, compassionate person. So he decides to just break off the betrothal and let her go off with the father of her child. It’s kind, thoughtful, and all done quietly.

As hurt as he is, Joseph responds with a courageous act of kindness. He does the right thing. He looks beyond himself to the other. He is faithful even when he assumes others have not been.

IV

Think about the Joseph’s you know– the quiet, faithful, unspoken heroes who rarely get thanked. They are the diligent people who work because it’s important, not for recognition or prestige. They are the loyal, patient, behind-the-scenes people.

Look at our Sunday school teachers; people who prepare a lesson week after week because they care that our kids know the gospel story. Their lives model the message that they teach. I think of the cooks at LOGOS – they prepare the food every week and serve it.

A new group of retired men come one day each month on a Tuesday morning and do repairs around the church – repair light fixtures, fix the door that won't close, change that spotlight up there, patch plaster...that sort of thing. They come with their tool boxes and get to work.

There are dozens of Josephs in the church.

Conclusion

God chose Mary to bring Jesus into the world. Sometimes we forget that God also chose Joseph. Just because he isn't in the limelight doesn't mean he isn't important. Some of the most dramatic changes happen because of the quiet, faithful, caring people.

Joseph reminds me of Rosa Parks - just an ordinary person, humble and quiet. She didn't organize a huge demonstration; she just was fed up one day and quietly refused to go along with an evil system. Her quiet, graceful action resulted in enormous change.

Our church is filled with Josephs. If you look carefully you'll see them everywhere – but you have to look.

John Milton wrote, "They also serve who stand and wait." God works through the strong, quiet witness of all the Josephs.

Amen