

God loves people. God loves people more than rules. We matter. That's pretty much the whole sermon. That encapsulates the point of our story today. I'll say more, but that's the point.

Perhaps it seems simplistic, but it's the heart of the gospel. It's what Jesus said. It's what Jesus said, and it's what Matthew said, and the other Gospel writers as well, and just so we don't miss it, Matthew started right off saying it.

He said it a lot, actually. You remember that long genealogy at the start of Matthew's Gospel account? That's what it says. It has a bunch of scandalous women listed in it. Which, by the way, should be our first clue that Matthew is up to something because women don't get listed in genealogies. It's a listing of the fathers. And Matthew throws in a couple of prostitutes, an adulteress and foreign woman who seduces her dead husband's cousin. That's all in the genealogy of Jesus - stories of women who struggled to make ends meet and in their struggling brought about the continuation of the house of Israel- through God's efforts.

Now, its one thing to have such family in the history of the family- we all have them.

Now, I'm not going to embarrass my parents by going into details, but don't we all know that in our family histories there's always someone a little spicy? The difference is we don't usually trot them right out and show them off. Not Matthew, he brings Jesus' sketchy genealogy right out and smacks it right down in the first chapter- before he even tells us about the birth of Jesus, he tells us about his dysfunctional family history.

Now I happen not to believe that Matthew spills this story out of the need to share salacious details. I'm quite sure he had a point in telling us about Jesus' family tree, and when I consider the women he included, I feel like he's telling us that people matter to God more than just about anything else in the world... certainly more than rules do. That genealogy comes right before the annunciation to Joseph. We just read the story a minute ago, but like all the Christmas stories, I think we hear them so often and so easily that they just slide right by us. They go down easy - but they shouldn't: Joseph had decided to divorce Mary. What a different story it is then. It seems like a reasonable response. She was having a baby; it wasn't his. I know we want to make the story all nice for Christmas, but that's not how it happened. Matthew wants us to know that Joseph had resolved- because he was a righteous man- to divorce Mary quietly. He didn't have to do it quietly. He could do it loudly. He would be perfectly within his right, in fact, to do so. He could have gone to the temple and demanded satisfaction from his unfaithful bride. Righteous indignation can be very satisfying, for a few minutes, right? Get some revenge? She shamed me, I'll shame her? Tit for tat? After all, she was the one who broke the rules, not he. Presumably they did everything right... custom would have dictated that she was a very young bride. They'd have tied the knot, and then followed the pattern that she should go back to her parents' home to live until she was old enough to live as Joseph's wife. I am sure this seems absolutely barbaric to us, but it was how it was done then. It was how women were treated in those days. Her father had an obligation to see that she would be cared for and so at the earliest possible time, a marriage would be arranged- and since she would then become a financial liability for her husband, a dowry would be negotiated, say some money or cattle to cover her keep. And

then they would go on down to the temple and formalize it. This sort of housekeeping matter needed to be handled while she was quite young so that her future could be assured. But it really was too young to be married, so she lived with her parents, he lived alone, they were married, but they hadn't yet lived together- and yes, the term seems appropriate here- in the Biblical sense. She was the one that broke the rules- why should he suffer? In fact, if he did go to the temple and demand satisfaction, he could keep the goats and sheep and camels - whatever had been negotiated with her family. She on the other hand, would probably be publicly executed, probably by stoning. That's *all* running under the story. It's what the rules said. The rules said it because somewhere back in the Law it said if there was any impurity in your community, you had to cut it out, cast it out, kill it, keep it from rubbing off on you. That's what the rules said. But Matthew tells us that Joseph resolved to divorce Mary *quietly* because he was a *righteous man*.

Stop. Righteousness demanded breaking the rules? Because you may as well know that the rules are pretty clear. In fact, you can go and look them up for yourself if you wish. Get a concordance, or google, look up adultery, go to the Leviticus and Deuteronomy citations and check it out. (I'm not going to do all the work for you here.) You don't have to take my word for it. In fact, I wish you would. I want to encourage you to familiarize yourself with all the Levitical purity codes. You will sleep without dreams, I promise you. But before you drift off to sleep, I would want you to know one thing about keeping the law. Matthew's Gospel account is very Jewish. It uses terminology and makes presuppositions about knowledge that would indicate that Matthew was very likely Jewish himself and wrote for a Jewish audience. And as a good Jew writing for

good Jews, Matthew would have know very well a couple of things about the Levitical and Deuteronomic Law- that to keep the law is to keep the WHOLE law, and that interpretation is as important as the law itself.

Now I don't know if you noticed that I switched from talking about the rules to talking about the Law. There are some academic distinctions that I want to make here in order to bring some clarity to Joseph's rule breaking, or so I hope. Joseph was a righteous man. That means he stood under the law. He was respected. He was a part of the temple community. Now, when I talk about the law, I am talking about the Torah. In the Hebrew scriptures there were three categories of scripture. The first, and most important is the Torah. It is comprised of the first five books that we find in our Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The other two categories, just for informational purposes, are the Kethuvim and Nevi'im, the writings and the prophets, but we're not concerned with those directly this morning. The law told the Hebrews how to live so that they were good Hebrews. God gave it to create community, to give a distinctive way of life to God's people as they were called into being to show forth the love, mercy, grace and yes, righteousness of God to the people who lived around them. (That's what we are talking about when, in the New Testament, we read about being "a light to the nations", for example.) Joseph was a good Jew and he lived under the law. But what I find interesting though, is Matthew's choice of words. He doesn't say, "despite the fact that he was a righteous man, Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly." No, Matthew says, "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."

In other words, it doesn't really matter whether he wanted to or not, he had to. Or so the Bible would seem to indicate. He couldn't keep her as his wife and remain righteous. You know the way that bad bumper sticker theology puts it, "God said it, I believe it; that settles it?"

Except it doesn't.

If anything, the fact that Joseph, in his righteousness resolved not to remain married to Mary tells us a great deal, but the fact that he resolved to do it *quietly* tells us much more. It would seem that personal righteousness demanded *thinking* about the law and *struggling* with it to render a faithful conclusion.

And the conclusion that Joseph drew was full of grace. Rather than take what the law would give him, satisfaction and a fat wallet, he resolved that he must divorce Mary and he must do it quietly... because he was righteous.

I find self-righteous people hard to take. Part of the reason I think this is the case is because righteousness is being lost in a sea of self-righteousness. Righteousness is concerned with doing what is pleasing to God. It's a personal matter between one's self and God. Self-righteousness on the other hand is unconcerned with God's opinion of us and probably overly concerned with others'. And I have to tell you that one of the occupational hazards that I endure as a minister is this: when someone finds out what I do for a living, a lot of times, they start to pan back over the conversation to figure out if they have said something offensive to me. That's just annoying. And this one is even worse- they start panning back over everything I have said to figure out if something I have said should be offensive to them. I was at a charity event recently with some folks from the church, and we were standing around chatting and some other folks walked up,

and as one of my friends was making introductions, she added, “Oh and he’s my minister.” I happened to be holding an adult beverage at the time, and I watched the person’s eyes go down from my face to the glass in my hand and back up to my face. That’s just annoying. It took all my restraint not to say, “Hey, eyes up here, buddy.”

Self-righteousness benefits no one. I don’t know how exactly we purge self-righteousness from the church’s repertoire but I have a starting point. If in thinking about the sin of others and judging it you start feeling good about yourself, then it’s probably time to own up to your own sin.

The biggest problem with self-righteousness is that it gets in the way of righteousness and that is a very big problem indeed. Righteousness is about doing what is pleasing to God—we presume to determine for others at our own peril.

And righteousness is important – but it’s not the same as conventional morality. Mind you, I don’t want to be quoted as the preacher who said morality wasn’t important...it is. But what we deem moral is some times subjective – and righteousness is not.

Sometimes it’s easy to get side-tracked in a pool of self-righteousness, when we’re so sure we know what we would do in a given situation. It’s more important, much more important, that we be concerned with doing first and foremost what is pleasing to God.

And then, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph.

I can tell you right now that for me it would have to be a seriously convincing angel. I don’t know how you feel about it, but if God was asking *me* to do this...Mary would probably have been a single mother. I mean, an angel appearing in dreams is sort of a suspect method of communication in my book. If I am expected to believe that God is calling me to some sort of radical departure from what I’ve been taught about

righteousness, then I have to be honest, I'm going to want some form of communication that could not as easily be attributed to side effects from eating too late, to borrow a line from Dickens. In fact, frankly, I think I would want it in writing, preferably notarized.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph.

I have to be honest, I just can't quite move on from that. Maybe I'm too rational for Biblical faith. An angel of the Lord- an angel of the Lord- appeared to Joseph, and all the sudden he is ready to bend- if not break entirely- God's law.

God loves people – don't ever forget that. That's the whole point of Christmas..

I don't know how to define righteousness in such a way that it sums up all that is pleasing to God. And I think maybe that's the point. When we start to try to nail God down too firmly, God's going to move. Because God doesn't want to be nailed down. God is always living, acting on the behalf of the poor and downtrodden, the lonely and despised.

Did you know that God is the God of the despised? The Bible says so.

God loves people. That's the heart of righteousness.

I have quoted Anne Lamott to you several times recently, and I only just realized that I've never given you her back-story.

She had a circuitous route to faith. It didn't come easily for her and it didn't come directly. She was addicted to drugs and alcohol and she found her way to a ramshackle church called Saint Andrew Presbyterian. It had a choir, she wrote, of five black women and a rather Amish looking white man and a congregation of about 30 people who radiated warmth.

She became a part of that congregation... first tentatively, leaving during the last hymn, and then more and more she got sucked in. Faith is like that, you know. It becomes

addictive the more you indulge it. She hadn't dried out yet or cleaned up, but she found a place she could call home.

Anyhow when she turned up pregnant and unmarried, it was this congregation that adopted her and her son. It was like her son was their son. And the congregation took it upon themselves and felt an obligation to provide for her. Though the other members of the church were by no stretch wealthy, she would often- probably every week- get home from church to find her jacket pocket with a couple of twenties and a ten or two. It was like a reverse pick-pocketing. But one woman's gifts still stood out for her. Mary Williams. She would put together these little baggies of dimes for Lamott and her son. And she would slip them in the pocket. Even though she needed them herself. And they kept on coming- even after Lamott became a successful and well-published author, little baggies of dimes. Lamott writes: "Mary doesn't know that professionally I'm doing much better now; she doesn't know that I no longer really need people to slip me money. But what's so dazzling to me, what's so painful and poignant, is that she doesn't bother with what I think she knows of doesn't know about my financial life. She just knows we need another bag of dimes," and, she concludes, "That is why I make Sam go to Church."<sup>1</sup>

God loves people, all kinds of people, and the point of all this Christmas stuff is just what exactly God will do to get to us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies, Some Thoughts on Faith. (Anchor, NY 1999) p105