

The Sunnybrook's Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

December 18, 2016

Joseph's Faith

Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced. – Matthew 1:18-25

Christmas is a time that invites imagination. So let's imagine our way into what it would have been like for Joseph, to have found out that Mary, his betrothed was expecting a child, and not by him! It's a scene that today you might expect to see on Jerry Springer, but then it was a scandal that could have wrecked Mary's life – could have even cost her her life. Imagine it with me now:

I don't know what to do! I feel so angry! So ----- betrayed! I thought I could trust her. I did trust her!

I have known her since she was small. As a child she was mischievous, spunky. She had her own mind, and a wicked sense of humour. She made me laugh. One time, I remember, one of the town fathers, an arrogant man who loved to parade around in his fine robes, was in the market. He was yelling at one of his servants, calling him every offensive word under the sun, strutting about calling attention to himself and abusing this servant horribly. He seemed to be enjoying all the attention. It was awful. Mary was there, and I could see she was upset by how this man was behaving. But she didn't just stand and watch like the others. She was small then, and quiet as a mouse, she slipped behind this gasbag and placed the discarded peel of a pomegranate right where his foot came down. He slipped, of course, and came down hard on his backside. Everyone laughed and laughed, especially when, all tangled in his fine robes, he couldn't get up by himself, and his servant – the same servant he had been abusing so viciously - had to help him back to his feet. I knew then, that there was something special about her, there was a fire in her that I admired.

And as she grew older the mischievousness matured into a lively wit and her indignation over arrogance and cruelty matured. One festival, she sang a song she had written that reminded me of that day in the market, about how God would upset the arrogant and cast the proud from their thrones. It was beautiful, and it had the old fire that I had noticed years before, but it made many of us a bit nervous. She could get in trouble for writing songs like that. If she had been a man, the town fathers might have beaten her for a song like that, but she got away with it.

When my parents began talking about who would be my wife, I mentioned Mary. I liked how spunky she was. When she was around, I felt more alive, I laughed, and I cried. Her lively sense of justice made me want to be a better man. I thought we would make a good match. I thought life with her would be, well, not so much comfortable as lively.

My parents approached her parents, and they were receptive to the idea. So Mary and I met, watched closely by a chaperone of course, and began talking about what kind of life we might have. We talked of our future, our dreams, our hopes. I enjoyed being with her, and I am glad to say that she seemed to enjoy being with me too. Our parents made the arrangement, we held the betrothal ceremony – we were committed now, although we were not living together.

We started to meet more regularly, once a week at least, twice if we could arrange it. I can't deny that I was looking forward to being married. I am a young man, and I have heard stories of what it is like to be with a woman, and I admit I let my imagination wander sometimes. But I respected her and I respected her family. We were always supervised, and I never tried to meet her without a chaperone, although sometimes after leaving her, my sleep was, well, disturbed. Sometimes our hands would touch and a shiver would run all through me. But that was the closest we came to anything inappropriate.

And then, one afternoon, Mary's father came to our house. He was nervous, and kept his eyes lowered, like he was ashamed. He tried three times to get the words out, and failed three times. We waited, with a

growing sense of disquiet. It was clear that whatever would be said would change us forever. Finally, he got it out: Mary was pregnant, four months along. We sat stunned, for a long time. Finally, my father spoke. We would need time, he said. I would need time, he said, for how to proceed would be my decision. I was an adult, a son of the covenant, and it was my life.

So Mary's father left, and we were left alone. They asked the inevitable hopeful question: was the baby mine? Could the baby possibly be mine? I told them the truth. It was not. I wished it was, for now it was clear what Mary was. We were betrothed and for her to sleep with someone else was adultery. If it became public, she would be shamed for life. I would be branded a cuckold. My father sat stone faced and cold. My mother began to cry.

I sat a while, and then got up, went into the workshop, grabbed my chisel and started on a mortise. I always did my best thinking while I was working. While I chipped away at the piece of wood, my head swirled with questions and speculation. What had happened? Who? Had she consented? Had someone forced himself on her? Had she given herself to someone? I didn't know what to do! I felt so angry! So ----- betrayed! I thought I could trust her. I had trusted her!

Eventually, after hours of torment, I realized that there was only one way to resolve this. I had to talk to Mary. So, in the gloom of evening, for the first time, I made my way in secret to her house, knocked on her window, and she slipped out to meet me. We walked in the dark for a long time. She was quieter than usual, more reflective. She had no answers to my urgent questions. She spoke of a dream that she did not fully understand, but she insisted that she had not betrayed me. She had brought no shame on her family, although she admitted others might see it differently. She had done nothing wrong. She was sorry if I my honour had been infringed. She understood my dilemma, and if I decided to divorce her, she would accept that, but she hoped I would choose otherwise.

This baby is not my baby, I told her. It can never be my child. It can never be a grandchild for my parents. And then I saw the fire, the old fire in her eyes. “It may not be your baby,” she said, with steel in her tone, “but if we do become a family, I will not let you shame him for the manner of his birth. I would rather raise him alone than let you do that.”

In the end, I left her with no answers to my questions. In a way I was more confused than before, but as I pondered her words, what struck me the most was not what she said, but how she said it. There was no shame in her. Though the tears seldom stopped flowing, they were not tears of remorse, or fear. They were tears of empathy, for my pain. She seemed at peace.

Many questions, and few answers. Who? What? Why? Most of all, Why?

It was late that night before I fell asleep. When I woke the next morning, I felt something I did not expect to feel. Perhaps it was a dream. Perhaps an angel had come in my sleep, but I felt at peace.

I spoke to my parents, and told them I had made a decision. We went to Mary’s house. They served us tea and then sat and waited. It took me sometime to find words for what I felt.

In the night, I said, I had realized that what I loved about Mary was that she treated everyone like a gift, a precious and unique creation of God. Whether highborn or low, whether admired or despised, she saw something precious in them. “This child might not be mine,” I said, “but I will treat him as a gift. He may not be my biological child, but he will be my son.” Amen.