

The Compassion of Love

Matthew 1:18-25

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4th Sunday in Advent – December 18, 2016

I.

This week in our church staff meeting, we had a conversation about the echo chamber that many of us seem to be living in—have you heard this term, “echo chamber”? A real echo chamber is where a sound is sent into an enclosed space, and then reverberates back onto itself. But lately the term “echo chamber” has come to describe what happens when we human beings surround ourselves with ideas, information, or opinions that support our own beliefs. Evidently we just love to find people who are like us (think about ancient tribes, family groups, or geographic groups, or even political parties). “In [his book] The Big Sort, Bill Bishop shows how, over the last 30 years, Americans have sorted themselves into like-minded neighborhoods. The same appears to be happening on the web.”¹ So what happens is that we insulate ourselves, without hearing many alternative voices.

As a staff, we were talking about how there are computer programs tracking our online activity, and how algorithms are used to create news stories and ads tailored to us. The echo chamber now includes our media consumption too. I see this in the ads on my Facebook feed—evidently the algorithm has figured out that I like to read stories from news outlets like Medium or the Huffington Post, and that what I really, really want in life is “Yoga Pants for the Office.” Sorry co-workers—I may love my Sunday heels but the internet knows what I’m shopping for (Yoga Pants for the Office)! That ad has even popped up on my Instagram feed. I know it sounds odd, but all of this conversation about reinforcing our own ideas, and how technology is aiding that effort, got me to thinking about “Gentle Joseph, Joseph Dear.” What if Joseph only surrounded himself with ideas that reinforced his thoughts of dismissing Mary?

Because she was pregnant with someone else’s baby, Joseph’s plan was to dismiss Mary quietly, as the law required. He was righteous, a rule follower, but his instincts were to show compassion; he wasn’t going to dismiss her publicly (which likely would have gotten her stoned to death, the punishment for adultery). He was just going to let her go quietly while he moved on. But then Joseph has this dream—and in his dream he hears an alternative voice, the text tells us it is an angelic voice, inviting him to consider

¹ Wired Magazine: Kartik Hosanagar’s article “Blame the Echo Chamber on FaceBook. But Blame Yourself, Too.” 11.25.16.

the outrageous possibility that Mary has not been unfaithful, but has conceived a child through the Holy Spirit. What if Joseph hadn't responded to his dream the way he did? What if he had held so tightly to his righteous identity and remained obedient only to the law, and left Mary alone to raise her child? And we, in our modern echo chambers, how can we loosen our grip on our own (self-) righteous identities, and begin to hear from people who think differently from us? Can we be as gracious as Joseph in our efforts to try to understand other points of view? And even in our modern, scientific, everything-has-an-explanation world, do we know how to listen to our dreams anymore? Maybe God is talking to us and we don't even know?

II.

Our quiet hero, Joseph, is faithful to that angelic voice opening his heart. He is faithful to Mary and to her baby, which he decides to raise as his own. If this marriage follows the pattern of most unions of that time, it is probably an arranged marriage where the bride and groom may have never met before, much less had any romance. So it's unlikely that Joseph chooses to protect his young bride because of his love for her; it's more likely that he is faithful to her out of his own sense of caring for someone vulnerable. Love, our word for today, in this case is more connected to justice. A teen mom with no family assets would not have fared well, and it would have been especially dangerous for her child to be fatherless and exposed. For Joseph, faithfulness to the oppressed—protection of a young girl and her baby—wins out over faithfulness to the law.

It's a foreshadowing of the tension in Jesus' own ministry, this tension between compassion versus rules. Jesus follows the path of his adoptive father, choosing to side with the oppressed out of a sense of justice that overrides blind obedience to the law. Later in Matthew, Jesus is asked by the tricky Pharisees, "Is it lawful to heal [the man with the withered hand] on the Sabbath?" When the Pharisees demand the letter of the law, Jesus turns to compassion. He answers, "...it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then Jesus turns to the man with the withered hand and heals him.² Perhaps the apple has not fallen far from the tree on this one, with Joseph as Jesus' father. And when we talk about Joseph's family tree, we see that he comes from a long line of heroes of the Bible. Our passage today begins with verse eighteen, but the first seventeen verses of Matthew are spent listing out name by name, who begat whom, tracing Joseph's family tree all the way back to David and Abraham. I know it can feel rather tedious to consider all of the "begats," but there is a richness in exploring ancestry. Within Joseph's genealogy are four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Why these four women? That may be a sermon for another day, but suffice it to say that they were

² Matthew 12:9-13

women who either were handed a bad situation that they turned around, or who had to bend the letter of the law in order to further the cause of justice. Joseph's lineage points to people (men and women) who risked their lives to further the people of God. Joseph is faithful-- to his family's lineage and to the cause of compassion-- when he chooses to accept Mary, even if he is uncertain of her faithfulness to him. He chooses compassion over righteousness—and that's what radical Love looks like.

III.

We know the next part of Joseph's journey, when an angel will appear to him in a dream, warning Joseph to take his family and flee Herod. He supports his family as best he can through uncertain, even dangerous, political times. We too may feel that we live in an uncertain time. You know, since the election there have been record donations to humanitarian groups, in anticipation of what may come after the inauguration. Compared to what organizations received in the same month a year ago, in November 2016 donations to the ACLU were up 965%, the Sierra Club up 852%, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations saw unprecedented donations from outside the Muslim community. People are choosing compassion over what might be a new interpretation of justice and civil rights in our country. How can we live into compassion, with the heart of Joseph as our guide? How are we being called to be angels of warning, or protectors of the vulnerable? Americans of all stripes will need to try to understand people who are different, people who look and talk and think differently. There will be moments when we will need our compassion to propel us into action on behalf of the vulnerable. And there will be times when we just need to listen and try to understand a different point of view.

Sometimes opposing viewpoints can coexist alongside each other in very rich ways. I've been reading this great book called Braiding Sweetgrass, I'm digesting it very slowly because it's so beautifully written. The author is a scientist and biology professor, and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She tells of a painful story when, as a young student, a college advisor asks, "So, why do you want to major in botany?" She remembers the piles of pressed leaves stored under her bed, the shoeboxes of seeds she had saved, how she felt that the plants had chosen her and had painted her dreams. She tells the registrar the truth: "I chose botany because I want to learn about why asters and goldenrod look so beautiful together." He lays down his pencil without recording her words and says, "Miss Wall.... I must tell you that *that* is not science. That is not at all the sort of thing with which botanists concern themselves.... I'll enroll you in General Botany so you can learn what it is." The year was 1975. Despite comments from her professors like "she's not bad for an Indian girl," Miss Wall goes on to graduate, earning a Master's Degree and Ph.D. in Botany. She excels in her field and becomes a professor herself.

Many years later she learns that the cones in the human eye are especially attuned to three wavelengths of color: one is especially tuned to red, one excels in perceiving blue, and the last—"optimally perceives light of two colors: purple and yellow." She remembers her purple asters and yellow goldenrod, and she realizes that these two opposites on an artist's color wheel, purple and yellow, are what's called a "reciprocal pair." Purple and yellow make each other "pop" when you see them together, and the human eye is especially sensitive to those two colors. The synthesis of the opposites makes them both shine brighter. If you stare at the color yellow long enough, and then shift your gaze to a white piece of paper, for a moment you will see violet.³ I offer this story up for us today because I think that in these polarizing times, we need to take some baby steps toward synthesis. We need more reciprocal pairs that seem like opposites but actually bring out the best in each other. We need to be that purple and that yellow, we need to hear angelic voices offering alternatives we hadn't thought of before.

IV.

The companion text for today is from Isaiah, and includes the line, "Therefore God will give you a sign: the young woman shall conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel (God-with-us)."⁴ When Christians hear these words, we think of Jesus—we call Jesus "Emmanuel (God-with-us)." Although we are reading backwards from the New Testament to the Hebrew Scriptures when we connect Jesus to the Isaiah passage, the concept of a child-sign is compelling. God will give a sign—a child-sign, and it will mean that God is making promises to God's people. This Advent, God is making a promise to us, we have a child-sign. The nativity story is an open invitation to choose the path of love and experience rebirth. It's a powerful corrective to our death-dealing culture. Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us is *always* coming into the world. A teenage mother will give birth to a son—this son will be born into poverty, and he will symbolize God's promise, he will be a child-sign that God is with us. He might be born in Brazil, under threat of the Zika Virus (and we will call him God-with-us); he might be born in Aleppo, amidst gunfire and chlorine gas attacks (and we will call him God-with-us); he might be born in India, with smog burning his nasal passages (and we will call him God-with-us); he might be born on the shores of the Island of Lesbos, in a collapsing boat filled with refugees (and we will call him God-with-us); he might be born an immigrant in the United States (and we will call him God-with-us); he might be born into a household afflicted by sorrow or illness (and we will call him God-with-us); he might be born into my broken heart or yours (and we will call him God-with-us). This child is coming to lift up the oppressed and hold the hands of the lonely. He will follow in his

³ Paraphrase from Braiding Sweetgrass, by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

⁴ Isaiah 7:10-16

father's footsteps and will choose compassion and love over blind obedience to the law. He is our child-sign, he is our Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Joseph offers us a model for receiving the child-sign that is Jesus—his is the model of synthesis, the alternative path, of listening for angelic voices that might disrupt our comfortable categories. This final week of Advent, I invite you to break free from whatever echo chamber you may find yourself in, look for places where you can live into your compassion, where you can practice Love, where you can *be* the complementary color. Let us look forward to the birth of our savior, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Amen.