

A SONG OF LOVE

Matthew 1:18-25

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What happens when love enters your life in a way that is totally unexpected? What happens when the way you love is not traditional? How do you act, what do you say, when your family doesn't look or act like any other?

What kind of love are we called to affirm and celebrate and practice as it comes to us in the Christmas story?

Most of the time, what we notice about the Christmas story is the magic of it - the angels that burst onto the night sky, the visitors who come from far away with exotic gifts.

What Matthew calls our attention to is the humanness of this story. The story could have been so different - the story of God's entry into the world, the story of the incarnation - we could have had a Messiah born to wealth and power, or a Messiah who was more closely aligned with the religious authorities.

But the story we have is the story of two very ordinary people, Mary and Joseph, who are engaged to be married. In the first century world, this is not a romantic declaration of intent. Rather, it is a legal contract, binding in every respect. To be engaged – or espoused, betrothed, or pledged (some of the other words used in various translations of the Bible) – was essentially be to married yet without having consummated that marriage or as yet living together. Which means that when Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant, he can only conclude that she has been unfaithful to him and so he likely experiences the pain, anguish, and sense of betrayal that any of us would have felt at such a devastating revelation.

In Joseph's day, there were only two realistic possibilities when faced with the possibility – or what must have seemed to Joseph as an unquestionable reality – of Mary's infidelity. He could

either publicly declare his injury, in which case Mary would likely have been stoned to death, or he could divorce her quietly, and he chooses the latter course.

It takes a visit from an angel to cause Joseph to orient himself in a different way. Still, the months leading up to the birth of Jesus must have been anguishing for both Mary and Joseph. There surely was shame involved, and name-calling, if not to Mary's face then certainly behind her back. As one biblical scholar puts it, it was not one blissful baby shower after another...*

This is a story of love. Not romantic love, for we have no evidence that Mary and Joseph's relationship was based on the kinds of feelings we in our culture associate with marriage proposals. Think, instead, of that wonderful song Tevye and Golde sing to each other in "Fiddler on the Roof"..."Do you love me?" They acknowledge that theirs was an arranged marriage, that their parents told them they would learn to love each other, and indeed they did.

Joseph's love for Mary is not based on feeling, most likely, but on faith and promise, and a belief that God is at work in their life together. It is a risk-taking love, a love that does not care about popular public opinion, a love that does what is right.

A parent comes into my office and tells me about how poorly she's being treated by her adolescent daughter. "She doesn't like me. She's told me to my face," this woman says through tears. "Some of my friends say I should give her a taste of her own medicine, treat her as badly as she's treating me. But I just can't do that. Am I wrong?"

I notice someone who looks upset in church. I find a minute afterwards to ask him how he is. "Oh, I'm ok, but thanks. I'm just really tired. I have been bringing dinner to my parents three nights a week. They live in Akron, so it's a long drive. My coworkers say I shouldn't do it. That I should tell my parents they have to move closer, or into a facility. But I just can't do that to them. They did so much for me all those years."

There is love that pays college tuition even when the grandchild doesn't show much appreciation. There is love that visits a friend in the nursing home, even though most of the time

the friend does nothing but complain. This is love because it is the right thing to do, born of deep conviction. Love that may not change the recipient of it, but that is not the point.

The movie entitled, "Loving" is based on the true story of Richard and Mildred Loving. They meet in Virginia. Richard is a white bricklayer. Mildred is black. Interracial marriage is illegal at the time in Virginia, so they go to Washington D.C. to be married and begin their life there, but they want to raise their children in Virginia. They want a rural environment, like they enjoyed as children. But they are not allowed to live in Virginia. Eventually their case goes to the United States Supreme Court, and the case wins, striking down all federal laws forbidding interracial marriage.

What I appreciated most about the movie is the way it depicted the ordinariness of the Loving family. They did not set out to be political activists, especially not Richard Loving, who shied away from it altogether. He was a quiet man, who worked hard, and was devoted to his family. All he wanted was to love his wife, raise his children, go to work every day, and be left alone. Neither he nor Mildred craved attention or the spotlight.

There is beauty in ordinary, day-to-day love. I have seen it many times in my ministry. I will never forget visiting a woman in this church who lived with her husband in a small bungalow near the lake. He had suffered a stroke and couldn't walk, and I stopped to see how they were doing and ask if they needed anything. It was the first time I'd been in their home. They showed me around - it was a cute house, sparkling clean. I soon realized that the bedrooms were upstairs. I had to ask. "Where does he sleep?" "He sleeps upstairs", the wife told me. And she saw the question on my face. "Oh," she said with a smile. "We've worked out a system." He drapes his arms around my neck and I kind of pull and drag him up the stairs every night. Sometimes we have to stop halfway up. Sometimes we laugh. Going down in the morning is easier."

Love does what is required, and sometimes more. I was asked to do a funeral for a woman who had lived many years with dementia. Her husband, I learned, visited her every single day in the facility where she was living. He stayed several hours, even though she could not speak to him anymore. He came in the morning, he dressed her, he brushed her hair, he put lipstick on her. He wanted the nursing staff to see her the way she'd always been - as a lovely woman who took good care of herself.

Other people might say he was wasting his time, but he would say he was doing the right thing, following his heart, acting out of love.

These are the kind of love stories I admire the most. I admire those same-sex couples in this church who have chosen to be married not in any way to make a political statement, but because they want to live their beautiful ordinary lives according to the love they believe in, the love given to them by God.

I admire those divorced couples in this church who put aside negative feelings towards their former spouses and choose to act with dignity and respect for the sake of their children.

I admire those who embrace the messiness of their family lives, the in-laws and the out-laws, the relatives who are hard to like...embracing them without embarrassment not because it's easy but because it's the right thing to do.

"Love is patient and kind," Paul tells us. "It is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

The love we affirm at Christmas is not the love of some picture-perfect romantic comedy or Hallmark drama. It is love that is hard, that sometimes faces criticism, that takes risks.

In a few minutes we're going to sing a hymn that has beautiful lyrics. It is a Christmas hymn, much more subdued and quiet than most. I love this fourth verse, "What can I offer, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise one, I would do my part; but

what can I offer: all my heart.” What God wants us to bring the Christ child is our real, human, messy, imperfect love.

The world needs it as much now as ever before. Not just intimate personal love but love that cares about those whose names we do not know.

In our scripture reading, the gospel writer of Matthew quotes from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who said, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us.” When Isaiah was referring to the coming of a Messiah, the nation of Israel was being threatened by foreign powers. The birth of the Messiah would signal and demonstrate God’s intent to save the nation of Israel from domination. In this time of great anxiety, Isaiah calls people to be aware of what God is doing. Be alert to signs of God trying to transform the world. Stay faithful, the Bible says, even in times of great upheaval, in times of chaos and confusion. God’s love is with us, not just in a personal way, but in a world-changing way. It is up to us to show a hurting world that God’s light still shines.

It is up to us to be the church, to embody love, not because we always feel like it, but even when we don’t. Joseph and Mary surely weren’t all smiles about their situation. Nothing about it was easy. Hollywood and cable TV would have us believe that love is always easy in the end...but there was nothing easy about walking from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a 70-mile distance, or riding that distance while on a donkey and nine months pregnant. There was nothing easy about hiding out from Herod for two years while he tried to kill all the baby boys in Israel. This story is a story of love. Not the love of romantic comedies. But the love that we see in real human life, in our imperfect families, and the love we are called to share with a broken world.

*David Lose, in his commentary on this passage