

Matthew 1:18-25

Relationships: The Calculus of Love

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This month our worship theme is Love. Last week Heike started this series with a sermon about the love of God. Certainly if we stop and think about Christmas, it is really all about God's love. God's gift of Jesus inspires all our gifts in the season of the year. The backdrop and foundation of the Christmas story is love, but the details scream love too. Each week I hope to focus on a different character in the Christmas drama and talk about love from the perspective of that person. Today we have read the story of Joseph. Joseph is quiet or at least he does not get a lot of press. But here in Matthew's gospel, Joseph plays a pivotal role. A lot depends on Joseph and he really steps up. He shows us what love means in a crisis.

The Bible tells us that Joseph was an upstanding man and full of faith. He was betrothed to Mary, and anticipating their marriage, because he really loved her. In those days when most families arranged the marriages for their children, it was not necessary for the bride and groom to be in love. It was a bonus that a real growing affection marked this relationship between Jesus' parents. But this engagement was not all smooth and it certainly had a rocky start. Sometimes we forget that; it is easy to miss. We know how the story ends, but at the time it must have felt very scary, disappointing and uncertain to be in love with a woman and then discover that she was already with child.

Even if you believe her story about an angel, it is a reach for a rational mind. Even if you believe it because you really do love her and trust that she believes she saw an angel how do you explain this to anybody else. Really? An angel?

Jewish law was very strict about such matters, so the sage advice was for Joseph to quietly release Mary from her obligations to him. A quiet divorce is what the Bible says. But then Joseph got a dream where he heard from an angel too. Joseph dreamed that an angel told him that Mary was telling the truth. So when he awoke, he took courage. In some ways it might have been a relief, because he acknowledged how much he loved Mary. Despite the stigma and ambiguity of this situation somehow Joseph's love gave him strength.

The Bible tells us that love is the language of life. Loving someone – parent, friend, lover, mentor, a child, a grandchild is one of life's enormous pleasures and great gifts. Loving someone else is part of being whole. Let's look at the story of Joseph and see what he can tell us about love.

In the first place, you have to have faith to really love someone. Love takes faith.

When Joseph understood that Mary was pregnant I imagine that it was not good news. He might have felt disappointed, betrayed, confused, and quite possibly angry about the news. Even after he had his dream and woke to re-consider things, it did not make his life all that easy. There was the village, his friends, and the family to consider. There was loss of his hopes for a simple wedding. It was a big adjustment. How did he decide to go ahead with the marriage? Maybe having an angel visit you makes things easier, but once you wake up from that dream - it takes a leap of faith to keep loving.

All the ballads of love paint such a simple picture. But in the trenches of life after you awake from your dreams - whatever they may be – love takes a lot of patience, determination, and faith. Some days you have to be willing to forgive the person you love because you are so disappointed. Some days you have to let go of your fantasy of what love looks like. Some days you have to give one another the benefit of the doubt, when you don't know all the answers. Many days you have to be willing to give each other a second chance if love is ever going to work.

The reason that Joseph took a leap of faith and went ahead with his marriage to young Mary was because he was already smitten. Even his disappointment could not quench the flame he held for her. He was already committed. When you really love someone then love is more flexible. It rolls with life's surprises. It is more resilient, but love always requires faith.

When you gaze at a child, as a new parent you take a leap of faith. You have no idea how this little person will turn out, but you don't care. Like Joseph you are on the journey, and you don't really look back. Even when you have some bumps, disappointments, or setbacks you still love your children. When your child gets sick you find new strength. If you discover that your child has a learning disability you get help for them. If your child gets depressed or runs away or had a mental illness there is not much you won't do for them, because you are smitten. When they try your patience, you brave on. The truth is that you don't know what will happen when you love someone.

Canadian singer KD Lang is well known for her ballad "Halleluiah". It is a popular song because in it she describes the uncertainties of love. With stunning Biblical imagery, she describes the pitfalls of love. It begins saying that we all wish for someone like young David, a servant who sat at our feet in the court of life and sing for our pleasure. We imagine that our loved one will hang on our words and meet our needs. That is what we imagine we want. But in our relationships instead we get the grown man David – someone who is much more complicated – someone who may be passionate, but also fickle. We get a real live person: someone full of contradictions, someone who is insecure, or who competes with us or who wounds us, or disappoints us. We get someone you cannot love without faith. Love is always just that - a leap of faith. Love becomes the ability to enjoy this person for who they are and not who you imagine they are.

In order to love Mary, Joseph had to let go of his own disappointment that Mary was pregnant. He had to overlook the fact that she was overjoyed to be with-child with someone else's child. He had

to accept that he might not be the center of attention in his own family, that his wife and son could eclipse him, and find the joy in his role. He probably did not know half of what he was signing on for. But who does when they fall in love. Still the reason God chose Joseph was because he understood that love always requires a leap of faith.

Halleluiah.

In the second place real love changes over time. When Joseph was betrothed to Mary she was young and innocent. When Joseph arranged this marriage with her family, he made some assumptions about who she was and what he could expect. But as we see once the angel visits Mary, she is not the same girl. No longer was Mary the quiet child of a good family. She was someone who had been chosen by God. That is a game-changer. Whether he fully appreciated it or not, Joseph was now getting involved with someone who had been catapulted into a place in history.

So Joseph had to adjust and change too. Most of us assume that once you find the “one”, then you live happily ever after. But that is the stuff of fairy tales. While we don’t usually want to re-think the decision of who we love, it is naïve to assume that people stay the same. Everyone who has been in a relationship has had to negotiate the seas of change – how much change can the relationship tolerate, and what is a deal-breaker. What makes most relationships thrive is this balance of steadiness and compatible change.

I have called this sermon the calculus of love. The word calculus came to me when I was thinking about this story, because calculus is the story of change. It is the symbolic manipulation of mathematical expressions to study different possibilities. Calculus is the math that predicts the effects of change. Most of us would just as soon not have our relationships change all that much, but love evolves. Life provides new demands, and new challenges. We have to adjust.

When your spouse is sick – seriously ill - your relationship changes. When your child has new needs your love evolves. When jobs take you on a journey to distant lands or new adventures, you test your love. I saw the movie “Lincoln” this weekend, and I recommend it for many reasons – not least of which I left the theatre proud to be an American, and proud of the possibilities we all have to do the right thing, when we can. But what I noticed in particular was that I enjoyed the depiction of the relationship between Mary Todd Lincoln and the President. Much has been made of the first Lady’s fragile mental state, and the difficulties the couple had, but this film opens a door into that relationship that makes it more understandable. Both the Lincolns were overwhelmed by the loss of their son William after he died. Things like that take a toll on a marriage. But this film also portrays tenderness between them that is born of shared suffering and resilient, too. **Love changes.**

Finally, love never dies. We never hear much more about Joseph but his love for Mary and Jesus changed the world. This man of character who gave himself humbly to the woman he loved and decided to raise her child, showed that little baby and the boy he became how to love. As a child Jesus grew up looking to Joseph’s example in all things. Joseph put his wife and child before himself, at a time when that was unheard of. His character and self-esteem were so secure that he was not threatened by the fact that his wife was pregnant; his character shaped the heart and mind of the greatest man who ever lived. Joseph’s love lived on in his family and in every family that strives to live in light of the teaching of Jesus.

None of that would have happened if Joseph had not found a way to forgive Mary – or overlook the fact that she was pregnant. None of this would have happened if Joseph’s love had been brittle or self-involved, and short on generosity. Who knows what makes the biggest differences in life. But sometimes I wonder if our hardest moments don’t also have the potential to be our greatest ones. Those times when nothing makes sense but we find a way to be more generous than we ever imagined

we could, then love takes on this eternal quality. I believe that love is one of the precious things that lasts forever. So whenever we find the strength to hold onto our deep love for one another, then love is our legacy, and the world is a better place because our love persevered. When we show empathy the world becomes a kinder place. Love lives on. When we love fiercely, the world is more passionate. Love lives on. When we love courageously and against the odds, then the Holy Spirit is set loose and God's Kingdom is made real. Each day we have a chance to love one another- and leave a legacy of love.