

Matthew 1: 18-25

“When No One is Watching”

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This month our sermon theme is Family. Families are a big topic these days. Lots of shows focus on families- The Family Guy, The Simpsons, Arrested Development, Married with Children, Malcolm in the Middle; the list is long. Famous families get a lot of attention - The British Royal Family, The First Family – the Obamas and Mrs. Robinson, Tom Brady & Giselle Bundchen. There is a new movie out this winter called The Family, and it is all about the Mafia. There is a lot of internet interest in extended families, adopted families, gay families, blended families, and families of choice. If you google “family” you will get 1 billion 180 million hits. Businesses are tripping over themselves to be family-friendly. Advertisers use pictures of families to sell everything from mini-vans, and dog food to life insurance and home security systems. We are fascinated by families these days.

When Alex Haley’s book Roots came out in 1976 he traced his roots as an ancestor named Kunta Kinte living in colonial Africa 200 years before. His story launched a television series and a whole genealogy movement which is going strong, still today. Many people want to find their connections to their tribe of ancestors. It is a modern craze to search the internet for information, to visit historic sites and to trace your family roots.

This is not new. Matthew begins his gospel by establishing the lineage of Joseph, the man who was married to Mary and who was Jesus’ father. Matthew demonstrates that Joseph descended from a righteous family providing Jesus’ lineage and family tree. Matthew shows us that Jesus came from a

good family and counted in his family tree Abraham and Jacob, Ruth and King David, Solomon and Josiah. Joseph descended from Jewish royalty.

Right after Matthew established Jesus' royal heritage, the gospel writer recounts a short story about Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph. This story, which we read today, does more than any chart or pedigree could ever do to prove the quality of people from whom Jesus came and the family into which he was born.

Most of us are familiar with the part of the story where Mary is sitting in her garden when the angel Gabriel comes out of nowhere to announce that Mary will have a baby. The Annunciation, as it was called, has become a popular subject of religious art and common knowledge. Mary's encounter with the angel is part of the human imagination. But the story of how Joseph discovered that he was going to have a baby is much more mysterious and private.

The Bible says that Joseph was a righteous man. He was responsible, disciplined and kind. He seemed to have waited to find the right person to wed. When the couple were betrothed, their relationship seemed to bear all the marks of kindness that make for a good match. Joseph must have had really high hopes for his life together with Mary, so Joseph must have been confused and terribly upset to hear Mary's news that she was with child. Any man in the Middle East in those days whose fiancé had apparently been unfaithful, had several options. Adultery was a capital offence, punishable by stoning if the man pressed charges, but Joseph had no taste for revenge, and chose not to humiliate Mary, any more. So he decided to quietly release her from her obligation. But then the angel Gabrielle appeared to Joseph in a dream. Gabriel told Joseph to take Mary as his wife and raise her son as his own.

What can we learn from this story for our lives today? This story tells us three things about a good family. A good family has 1. Empathy, 2. Honesty & 3. Openness.

The three points today come from those – Empathy, Honesty and Openness.

The first quality is empathy.

Joseph had the right instincts. He was trying to think about what would be best for Mary. He had empathy for her. He was aware of how hurt he felt, but he was also cognizant of the fact that Mary would suffer much more than he did. She would have to endure the scorn and gossip of women who get pregnant out of wedlock. She would have to fend off rumors and deal with villagers who shunned her.

What makes Joseph a great man in my mind is his ability to balance his own hurt, with her anguish. He was able to balance his own wounded pride with her potential shame. To my mind what makes Joseph a great man is that he steadfastly refuses to become a victim in this moment and sets his own standard, what will be best for everyone.

Joseph had a lot of options. He might have publically denounced Mary, and let her suffer public humiliation and criminal prosecution. He might have saved what was left of his reputation, but in the process thrown Mary under the bus. No one would have blamed him for allowing self-interest to prevail. But Joseph set a very different tone. Had he decided to save his own reputation, he would never have had the opportunity to father the greatest child that ever lived.

That took empathy. Empathy is a quality we learn in our families. Harper Lee wrote in To Kill a Mockingbird that the best way to understand a person is to stand in his or her shoes. When you live in a family you are so close that you see things others miss. You have a chance to stand in their shoes, and walk around. From the time we are forced to learn to share our toys with our siblings we begin to learn about what it means to walk around in someone else's shoes. As we learn to negotiate with our cousins, or live with odd aunts or outrageous uncles, our families teach us how to consider others. They teach us to share, to negotiate, to compromise, to put someone else's need before our own. Good families provide the stew where everyone knows that they are valued, and they will have to give a little to get a lot. Good families teach the children and adults that no one is expendable and we all need each other. It takes time to learn empathy. Sometimes I believe it is our life's work. Empathy

The second quality in a good family is Honesty. Joseph thought he was doing what was best for Mary by leaving her, but perhaps the angel Gabrielle helped him to see that he was also saving his own reputation by leaving her. Telling himself it was the right or kinder thing to do, Joseph was also sparing himself a complicated marriage, at least in the beginning. When the angel came to him in a dream, Joseph may have seen himself more clearly. In families it is hard to be honest because there are so many people pretending to be doing the right thing for someone else, when they are really just doing the right thing for themselves under the guise of helping someone else. In a family you don't really fool anybody if you pretend to be nice. In a family everybody sees it all.

On the anniversary of the Newtown shooting that killed 20 children and 6 school employees, I want to take a moment to talk about guns and families. It is hard to do a whole series on families without discussing this important subject in our society.

A year ago the Newtown tragedy prompted many people from President Obama on down to declare that our gun laws must be changed to include more restriction, and more back ground checks. That was one year ago. But tragically, the President was unable to deliver on this promise. In the last year 32,833 more Americans have been murdered as a result of gun violence; that is the population of a small city wiped out, utterly eliminated.

Sadly, many states have actually weakened gun control in the last year. {"Newtown far from a catalyst for gun control" by Brian MacQuarrie Boston Globe Thursday December 12, 2013, p. A1} We had another incident in a suburban high school near Denver last Friday. We have grown so accustomed to children being killed in their schools and homes that this shooting was almost ignored and it was only on page 7 of the Boston Globe.

The reason I bring it up in a sermon about families and honesty is because I believe that there is something fundamentally dis-honest about the gun lobby's propaganda. A lot of people have bought the gun owner propaganda. The gun magazines and websites promote the fantasy that guns make them feel

safe. People buy guns because they tell themselves that they will be protecting their families. Joan Wickersham wrote a moving op-ed piece this week about the fantasy that many people participate in when they purchase hand guns. They tell themselves that they will be the protectors of their families in this violent world of ours. "The real story here is about an America whose currency is violence and whose message is shoot or be shot. In this story you are Clint Eastwood or Rambo You need to be prepared- for a burglar, for someone else's road rage, for an attack that will require you to ricochet bullets"..."One of these days" these folks believe" someone is going to use deadly force against you or your loved ones, and maybe you will need to use your AK 47.. or brandishing it at the guy who is pointing his at you, will prevent a gun fight." Wickersham concludes her article with this poignant revelation. She says, "The only person I've ever known who died of a gunshot wound was my father, who shot himself with a handgun he'd had for 20 years./ He'd bought it to protect his family."

The folly here is imagining that your family will be safer because you have bought a gun. No statistics support this notion. Parents tell themselves a lie – that they are thinking of others, while they want to be heroes. The Bible tells of another type of hero - fathers like Joseph secure enough to overcome their wounded pride, quiet men who don't always know what the future holds but knew that his love for Mary was stronger than the obstacles they faced. Honesty

Finally, a good family is open. It does not keep secrets. Like Joseph, most people imagine that they can slip away from their problems, or disappointing issues. They think they can cover up the dirty laundry and everything will melt away. They think that is they don't mention the hard stuff, they can leave it behind and it will evaporate, never to be noticed again. The real truth is that people find things out. They sense what they don't know for sure. They gossip, and question one another for information. Family secrets are an oxymoron there is no such thing. People find out. You cannot hide your secrets

One family that has gained enormous popularity in recent years on PBS is the Crawley Family that lives at Downton Abbey. The Earl of Grantham, his American wife Cora, and their three daughters

live in a home with plenty of secrets upstairs and down in the servant quarters, too. From Mr. Pamouk, to Mr. Bates, to Thomas and Ethel, it is the secrets in the house that make the series so delicious. At one lavish dinner party when Earl Grantham is complaining about how, despite his efforts to raise his daughters with every advantage, one married a distant cousin from the middle class, and the other eloped with the chauffeur. Just in the middle of his complaint, his mother, the outspoken Dowager Duchess played brilliantly by Maggie Smith, proclaims- "No family is ever what it seems from the outside." What many people have found so irresistible about the Crawley's is that through their family we see again that what happens in a house when no one seems to be watching affects all of us. Those private moments when we imagine no one will see our deeds or mis-deeds have a much bigger impact that we ever imagine they will.

How do we foster healthy family relationships? How do we set a tone which will build peaceful homes, happy relationships, and pleasant children? The answer is love. Not sappy love, or dramatic love, or emotionally stifling love, but love that is empathetic and honest, brave rather than selfish. We call these three- Mary Joseph and young Jesus, the Holy Family – not just because Jesus was their child, but because they saw that even before he was born, he was a gift from God. Joseph and Mary recognized that being parents was a holy responsibility. Theirs was a holy family because they remind us that each family step onto holy ground when we work honestly and openly to walk in each other's shoes, and do what is best for everyone.