

Joseph's Dilemma
Matthew 1:18-25

Even in the context of the modern meltdown of marriage, the situation between Mary and Joseph is more than a little strange. They are espoused, and Joseph is called Mary's husband. Yet at the same time, verse 18 tells us that they hadn't come together yet – meaning they hadn't had intimate relations. And in verse 20, the angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary to be his wife. So, are they married or aren't they? Exactly what sort of relationship do they have?

Simply put, they were betrothed, publicly and solemnly promised to one another, but not yet married. Today, we would call them engaged, but in those days, betrothal was a lot more serious. After all, engagements are broken all the time these days, and couples who go through that suffer from no lasting social stigma. But back in those days, when a couple made a formal declaration of their intent to marry, which was called a betrothal, that was just as binding a promise as the marriage itself. And the season of betrothal could last for months or even years.

Why was that? Well, sometimes, a groom had to wait until he had saved up enough money to marry and then support his wife. In the days of Joseph and Mary, for example, a groom often had to build a room onto his father's house in which the new couple would live. Only when the groom's father said that everything was ready could the wedding proceed.

And now we can see just how devastating the news was to Joseph. After all, he had not just announced his intention to marry Mary. He had been working and saving and building and preparing all the while he was waiting for the wedding to take place. And then Joseph found out that Mary was going to have a baby, but it wasn't going to be his baby.

Now, we don't know how Joseph came to find out about Mary's pregnancy. In the portion of Luke's gospel that we read responsively this morning, an angel came to tell Mary this news, but neither Luke nor Matthew mention her relating this news to Joseph. Instead, Matthew simply says in verse 18 that she was "found" to be with child – by the time Joseph heard the news, her pregnancy was apparently far enough along to be noticed.

But even if Mary had told Joseph what the angel had said to her, he apparently didn't believe it, at least not at first. And it would be hard to believe the angel's words, wouldn't it? "The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you, and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God." We still don't understand what that means or how Jesus could be fully God and fully man at the same time. How could we possibly expect Joseph to believe such a story?

Especially not when there were so many other, more commonplace, more believable explanations. I mean, really, was it more likely that Mary was bearing a miraculous, Spirit-conceived child – or that she had simply gotten tired of waiting for Joseph and had an affair? If you were Mary's fiancée, what would you believe?

And what would you do if you became convinced that she had cheated on you? Would you want to get back at her? Joseph could have done that, you know. The Law of Moses said that those who were caught in adultery were to be put to death, but by this time in history, people

didn't usually go to that extreme – instead, broken betrothals were usually handled by divorce. So, since Joseph and Mary were betrothed to one another, Joseph would have been well within his rights to have Mary humiliated by a public trial. He could have made sure that she would never enjoy a respectable, comfortable life.

Yes, that would have been the natural thing to do, the understandable thing to do – to assuage his hurt feelings by taking it out on Mary, to make her suffer for what he must have thought she had done.

And come to think of it, would any of us have blamed God if He had chosen to react to human sin in the same way? After all, have we been faithful to Him? Have we shown Him the devotion He deserves? God created us to love Him and to be in relationship with Him – but how many of us who call ourselves Christians really put Him first in our lives? If God had just cut us all off, He would have been well within His rights, wouldn't He? Infidelity is never a pretty thing.

But Joseph wasn't that sort of guy. Matthew tells us that he was a just man, a righteous man, a man who was living in accordance with God's will. Now, make no mistake. Before he had the dream recorded in today's passage he seems to have believed that Mary had cheated on him. But because he loved her he decided to spare her the worst of the consequences he must have thought she deserved. He could have made her endure a public trial, but instead he decided to divorce her quietly. Maybe she could just leave town until the baby was born. Maybe no one else would find out about it. In short, even in the midst of his heartbreak, Joseph was thinking of what was in Mary's best interest.

And that, you see, is what love really means. Oh, these days we usually confuse love with the many emotions that it conjures up. We all too often confuse love with the affection we feel, or the passion that we have for someone.

But Joseph shows us what true love is – it's seeking what is best for someone else, desiring that someone else have what they need, regardless of the cost to the self. It is the selfish person who says, "If you don't want to be with me, I don't want you to be happy." But one who truly loves says to the beloved, "If you don't want to be with me, I still want what's best for you."

And it's only if we understand love in this sort of radically selfless way that we can ever hope to make sense out of what the angel told Joseph in this dream. For why would God cause Mary to conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit? Why would God consent to be Immanuel, God With Us, in a world full of sinners who, at root, really don't want very much to do with Him? Why would God want to send Jesus to save His people from their sins?

Sure, we can say it was to keep His promises to Abraham and David. We can say it was to fulfill the words that God had spoken hundreds of years before to prophets like Isaiah, words which Matthew quotes for us in verse 23. Sure, we can point to the fact that God is so righteous and holy and true that He can't break a promise that He has ever made. And it is wonderful to think that, in our world of broken vows and broken promises, there is Someone we can always count on to tell it like it is, someone whose word truly is His bond.

But why would God make those promises in the first place? Why would God have told Abraham that in one of his descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed? Because God knew that unfaithful sinners like us desperately needed a blessing. Why would God have told David that one of his descendants would reign on his throne forever? Because God knew that rebellious sinners like us needed a holy and righteous king to rule over us. And why would God want to give us what we need instead of the sinful freedom that we crave, instead of satisfying our constant desire to have things our own way? Could it be that God loves sinners the way that Joseph loved Mary, even when he thought she had been unfaithful?

So, how can we respond to such love? Once again, Joseph gives us a clue. In his dream, he discovered that Mary had not in fact been unfaithful to him – or did he? Now, it's true that in that dream an angel did confirm for Joseph what Mary had been told. The angel told Joseph that she hadn't cheated on him after all, but that her baby would be born by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But it was, after all, only a dream, right? Now, it is true that people in the ancient world took dreams a lot more seriously than we tend to do, but still, it was just a dream, right? Did Joseph have to believe it, especially when he couldn't understand it?

Today, you may find it just as hard to believe God's Word. You may find it hard to believe that God really loves you. Maybe you just can't make sense out of your life. Maybe you feel helpless in the face of sickness in yourself or loved ones, or in the face of relational problems you just can't work out. Maybe you're worried about your job or how you are going to make ends meet. Maybe you're tired or frustrated or disappointed. Maybe you're filled with regrets about the way your life has turned out. Maybe you are having a hard time celebrating this holiday season because you are missing loved ones who have gone on to be with the Lord. Maybe, with all the stuff going on in your life, the idea that God loves you seems just as unbelievable as it must have seemed to Joseph that Mary was going to have a baby by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But what did Joseph do? We know that even before the dream he loved Mary enough to keep her from public shame. And at the end of the story, we find that he loved her enough to marry her, even though he still didn't really understand what was going on. And we might be tempted to believe that Joseph's love for Mary just made him blind to reality, that he went ahead and married her in spite of everything he knew to be true.

But in the very last verse of the story, we instead find the key that unlocked his heart and enabled him to love in such a selfless way. We find that he called the baby Jesus. Now, what's so important about that? Remember, in verse 21, that's what the angel told Joseph to call the baby, because the name Jesus, or in Hebrew Yeshua, means Savior. So, when Joseph did what the angel said, he was expressing, not his understanding of the situation, and not even his love for Mary, but his obedience to God. By doing what the angel had told him, Joseph shows us that his devotion to God, his trust in God was at least as great as his love for Mary.

And that's all God really asks of us today. He doesn't expect us to figure out how Jesus could be the Son of God and the Son of Mary all at the same time – theologians have been

arguing for years about what that really means. God doesn't expect us to understand everything about how Jesus saves sinners – the cross continues to be the profoundest of mysteries. And I don't suppose God expects us to understand the sort of unconditional, self-sacrificial love that moved His heart to provide a Savior for us, even though Joseph's example shows us that we can at least emulate this sort of love in a small way. No, God just asks us to trust Him, to trust His love, to trust His plan, to trust this Jesus, this Savior that He has provided for us. And in trusting Him, in spite of all the problems we have in our lives, we can rejoice.