

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE RIGHTEOUS?
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Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be righteous?
That's the question Matthew's raising
today.

As the curtain opens on the gospel story, we learn about some things that have already happened. We learn that Mary and Joseph are engaged, which means they're legally bound to each other. Even though there hasn't been a wedding yet, they can't just walk away from this relationship. We also learn that Mary is pregnant, and Joseph is not the father, and he has no idea the baby was divinely conceived. So, in his mind, he's facing a major dilemma.

Mary has apparently been unfaithful, which means Joseph should divorce her. That's what the law prescribed. It would also make him righteous. Because righteousness back then didn't mean doing the right thing in a moral sense. It meant doing the right thing in a legal sense. The problem is, if he does divorce her, everyone will find out she committed adultery, and the penalty for

adultery was pretty gruesome. The law said adulterers were to be taken to the gate of the town where they lived and publicly stoned to death.

So, imagine how Joseph must be feeling. As far as he knows, he's been betrayed and made a fool of by the woman he was planning to marry. So, he must be feeling hurt and angry and humiliated. And yet, he still loves her. So, the thought of her being dragged through the streets and put to death in such a horrible way must make him feel sick to his stomach.

What can he do? If he picks door number one, Mary dies. If he picks door number two, his reputation is tarnished, and he loses his standing in the community. He won't be seen as righteous anymore, and people won't want to have anything to do with him. Either way, the Christmas story is not getting off to a great start. But then, this isn't just any story. This is the story of a God who can enter even

the bleakest of situations and bring hope and salvation.

How does Joseph get out of this seemingly impossible situation, then? Simple. He picks door number three. He decides he's going to do the legal thing, and the righteous thing, and divorce Mary. But he's going to do it quietly, so no one finds out what she did, and there won't be any consequences.

Seems like a win-win. But can you really call it keeping the law? If you ask me, it sounds more like bending the law. He's going to do what the law says and divorce Mary, but he's going to do it in such a way that she avoids the punishment the law requires. Which means we can't really call Joseph righteous. Because a righteous person is someone who follows the law to the letter, not someone who skirts around it. And yet, listen to what Matthew says: Mary's husband Joseph, "being a righteous man... planned to dismiss her quietly."

How can that be? How can Matthew say Joseph is righteous when he's doing something that's the exact opposite of righteous? It doesn't make any sense—until you see what he's up to. He's re-defining righteousness, so it's not Joseph's faithfulness to the law that makes him righteous. It's his faithfulness to Mary. Matthew's telling us that's what true righteousness is. It's not about keeping the law. It's about prioritizing people. It's not about following the rules. It's about putting love first. And it's about doing so even when it's risky, and there's a cost.

Now, most of us never face situations as dire as the one Joseph is facing. For him this is literally life and death. But that doesn't mean there aren't plenty of times when we feel the same basic tension in our lives—the tension between what some rule or norm or custom is telling us to do and what love is telling us to do. Maybe there's a policy at your office that discriminates against certain employees. Do you go along with it, or do you challenge it, knowing you might get in trouble? Maybe some of your friends like to get together and gossip, and it gets pretty mean sometimes. Do you keep quiet, or do

you say something, knowing it might get awkward? Maybe people in your community are being treated unfairly. Do you tell yourself it's not your problem, or do you get involved, knowing it might complicate your life?

We all have moments like that—some small, some big; some clear, some fuzzy. But all of them important because they give us a chance to live our faith.

Right after seminary, I did a six-month residency as a hospital chaplain, and one night I got called in to see a woman whose baby was stillborn. She wanted me to baptize the baby, which I knew I shouldn't do. Baptism is for the living, not the dead. But I also knew it would give her some peace, and later on she'd be able to look back and say she did that for her child. So, I got some water, and I did what my theological training said was wrong but my heart said was right.

This is what righteousness really comes down to: recognizing that the highest law is love, and that sometimes—not always, but sometimes—love calls us to bend the rules, maybe even break them, and put people first no matter what. And if we're being honest, we have to admit that sometimes we fall short. Sometimes we give in to the tension and do what's easy and safe instead of letting love take us down a more difficult path. I know I've been guilty of that many times.

So maybe the thing to do is use Advent as a time to ask ourselves: Where in our lives are we avoiding love's call? Where are we staying silent when we should be raising our voices? Where are we going along with things we know aren't right just because we're afraid of what the consequences might be? Because when we choose love over law—when we bend the rules for the sake of another—we're not just doing something nice. We're doing something sacred. We're participating in the same kind of righteousness that allowed the gospel to unfold in the first place.

Think about it. If Joseph had stuck to the letter of the law, if he'd done the "righteous" thing in the old sense of that word, Mary would've been killed. Jesus would've never been born. And the Christmas story would've ended in violence before it even began. But

Joseph chose love. He put Mary's life ahead of his reputation, ahead of the law, ahead of everything. And that choice—that risky, uncomfortable choice—was how God entered that bleak situation and brought hope and salvation.

So, as we're getting ready for Christmas, we should be asking ourselves: "Where do we see opportunities in our lives to be righteous like Joseph?" Because that kind of righteousness is what makes Christmas possible. It's what makes room for God to enter the world and transform it. Thanks be to God.

Closing prayer:

God of love and mercy, you came into our world through an act of courage—through Joseph's willingness to put love ahead of law, to risk himself for the sake of another. Give us that same courage, and the strength to be your presence in the world—to enter the bleak situations around us and make room for your hope and salvation to break in. As we prepare to welcome Jesus into the world once more, prepare our hearts to receive him. Make us brave. Make us faithful. Make us yours. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.