

Lessons from Joseph:
“The Saint of Everyday Life”

On the southern slope of Mount Royal in the city of Montreal stands Canada's largest church, the Oratory of St. Joseph—a Catholic shrine built in honor of Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus. It's a magnificent structure, reputed to have one of the largest copper domes in the world. And it's a pilgrimage site for multitudes of the Catholic faithful—especially those who come to pray for healing. Its founder, Brother André, dedicated the church to Joseph, who is honored in the Catholic tradition as the “saint of everyday life,” and a patron of those seeking help from God in matters related to “family, work, health, death and material needs.”*

The church museum also houses what may be the world's largest collection of nativity sets. When our family visited there many years ago, I was impressed by the endless creativity Christians around the world have shown in crafting images of Christ's birth that reflect their own cultures and daily lives.

Although we may not venerate Joseph in quite the same way, we can benefit from listening to the story of this “saint of everyday life.” We might begin with the simple fact that we really don't know all that much about him. By my count, his name appears in the New Testament just 15 times, all—except for one passing reference—in Jesus' earliest years. As for biographical details, all we know is that he was—as Luke puts it-- “of the house and lineage of David,” that he had family ties in

Bethlehem, and that he lived—and probably died—in Nazareth of Galilee, where he was a carpenter or some similar sort of skilled craftsman.

For the most part then, apart from a few dramatic events, Joseph seems to have lived a pretty ordinary life far away from the spotlight. In other words, he lived the way most people do. But if it's true that times of crisis reveal the essence of a person's character then the brief glimpse we get of Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew may lead us to some wisdom about being an everyday man and father today.

We live in times when, in our American culture at least, we hear it said that men and fathers are in a time of crisis. Practically every day lately we've seen one supposed male role model after another crumble under revelations ranging from verbal sexual harassment to physical assault. But this isn't limited to the rich and powerful—we are also witnessing an epidemic of sexual assault on college campuses and in the military. It's as if in this area of life, men in our society seemed to have lost their moral compass. At the same time, we see many young men—especially those who don't take the path to college—struggle to find a way to make a living and do meaningful work. We see young men who want to be good husbands and fathers, but struggle to figure out how amid the complicated situations so many families find themselves in.

Having said this, while we need to be careful not to turn Joseph into some twenty-first century superdad, we might learn something from him. Joseph had certain things going for him. His path through life was certainly less complicated than it is for many men today. In his small community, he would have most likely

apprenticed with his father and had his life's work laid out before him. There were traditions for how everything was supposed to work—including marriage and family. His life was presumably on that secure path when he was betrothed to Mary. But all of it was thrown into turmoil with the revelation that Mary was “with child.”

As the story begins Joseph didn't yet know the part about this child being conceived “by the Holy Spirit.” He was stuck in a very human dilemma—to all appearances Mary had broken her sacred word, and in the worst possible way. Despite the differences between our customs and theirs, it's hard to imagine anyone not being deeply hurt. But in that time the injury may have been less about Joseph's heart being broken than about his honor being offended, and not only his, but his family's and Mary's family's, too. In fact, there are still places in the world today where some uncles or cousins would have probably taken it upon themselves to kill her. At a minimum, Joseph had legal remedies he could pursue. He could end the engagement—which was tantamount to a divorce in that world—and he could publicly shame Mary and label her forever as “damaged goods.”

But Matthew says that Joseph was a “righteous man”—which in this case means that he was not so much concerned about doing the legal thing as he was concerned with doing the right thing. We can understand why he would want to cancel the marriage contract—but he was concerned about more than his own interests. He was—despite everything he had reason to believe about her—concerned about Mary's welfare, even though for all we know, she could have been practically a stranger to him.

We need more people like Joseph—men and women who are deeply concerned about how their actions affect other people—who resist the temptation when they are hurt to hurt back. And in today's world where so many young men seem to have a lot of things to be angry about, we need men to who don't strike back or lash out at the people closest to them. Life is harder for many of them than it was for my generation. Somehow they need to hear the good news that there is another path.

Joseph was a good man. He was also a man of faith. Matthew says that an angel appeared to him in a dream and laid out what God was doing. But would you have believed it? What Joseph hears is impossible on so many fronts. We might think that an angelic visitation ought to clinch the deal, but I can imagine that when the angel said that “the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” – he may not have had a clue about what that could have meant. Impossible is still impossible. But he trusted the divine vision—and we might add that he trusted Mary, too. Although he had already made his mind up, he changed plans, and went forward with the marriage to Mary and welcomed her child as his own.

Christmas, as I say so often, is a time of rediscovering faith and hope. Those cherished prophecies from Isaiah of the Messiah's coming and all that follows from it, lift our eyes to believe that a different world and a different life is possible. The story that follows shows that transformation isn't automatic or painless – it involves death and resurrection. But it is possible.

While we're here this morning, our friend Vinnie Marrantino is leading worship across town at the Dixon Correctional Facility. I can't imagine myself doing that, by the way. But just a week ago Vinnie and I were talking, and he told of how—amid everything that makes that ministry complicated and challenging—he's seen men emerge from their incarceration to lead new lives. They believe the good news of Christ, they believe that they're not defined by their pasts, and by faith they overcome the odds.

Today, many young men come into adulthood and become fathers, not having had a good model in their own fathers, and pulled about by all sorts of societal forces and distorted images of manhood—and as a result they often don't know how to be good men or good fathers. They need the witness of men like Joseph and other men of faith to show them that with God's help they can learn and grow and change.

Joseph was good man, and a man of faith. He also had courage. It's no accident that the angel's first words to him were, "Do not be afraid." It took courage to act on his faith. Later it would take even more courage to be the protector of his family and lead them into Egypt where they lived as refugees for years until it was finally safe to go home again.

Moral character, faith, courage – these are the lessons we learn from "the saint of everyday life." They came to the forefront in the drama surrounding Jesus' birth, but we can trust that Joseph was the same person through all the more daily challenges of being a husband and father and carpenter in a small town in Galilee.

Like Joseph, 99% of our lives are lived doing ordinary stuff. The subject matter of our lives is family, work, health, death, and material needs. We experience most of our failings and triumphs in these arenas. Having the ordinary faith and courage to do the right thing every day is what defines us. In these times when just doing the ordinary can seem extraordinary, maybe it is a time to take a closer look at Joseph. Maybe we need to find—or to be—Josephs in the lives of those we touch.

On this Christmas Eve, let us remember that by becoming one of us, the Son of God entered right into the heart of all that is ordinary about being human. He was a child and a son, he trained as a carpenter, worshiped in a little synagogue up in Nazareth, was tempted in all the ordinary ways that we are tempted. As we dream big dreams for the world this Christmas, let us remember that Jesus is also the redeemer of everyday life, the transformer of everyday life, and the Lord of everyday life. Thanks be to God! Amen.

*<https://www.saint-joseph.org/en/>

*Rev. David Spaulding
First Presbyterian Church, Dixon
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