

WGUMC December 22, 2013  
Matthew 1:18-25

"Love, in spite of"

When Hank and I were preparing for the birth of our child, we did all the things that over-educated, over-aged parents do. We bought lots of books: *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care*, Terry Brazelton's *Touchpoints*. And the ever helpful, Dave Barry's *Babies and Other Hazards of Sex*.

Barry's book has loads of practical advice. For instance, he gives dads a baby maintenance chart, like the one for your car. But this one says, instead of changing the oil every 3,000 miles, you have to check all orifices every ten minutes for emerging solids and liquids, changing containment garments as needed.

And for the mom's out there who are struggling with whether they should stay home with their baby or go back to work, Dave Barry says, "The solution to this dilemma is to have your baby get a job." He suggests you get him or her hired out

as a paperweight, a consultant, a clerk at the DMV or Vice President.

You have to laugh at all the challenges you bring on yourself by bringing a baby into the world. Because if you don't laugh, you will cry. Babies have a godlike power to complicate our lives. Just ask Lisa Jacobs. I don't even want to know what she has to do to get over here for boot camp at 5:30 in the morning.

One of the things Lisa and Landon are learning is that as parents, you have to be present all the time. And at least one of you has to be awake or the two of you can drive all over town thinking that the other parent has buckled the baby in his car seat. (How many parents here have done that one?)

OK. Everyone who has been a parent can tell you a funny, scary story about what happened when a 7 or 8-pound cluster bomb of chaos landed in their lives. But none of us has ever

faced the complications that Joseph faced when he found out that Jesus was about to land in his life.

Matthew gives us the nitty gritty details that Luke leaves out. In fact, Matthew is the only Gospel that gives us even an inkling of Joseph as a real person. First we learn that Joseph and Mary are engaged, which back then was more of a legal arrangement than it is today. Then Mary is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. But there's no angel Gabriel in this version, so we're not told how this happens, how Joseph finds out about it or exactly how he feels about it. Still, we get the distinct impression that Joseph, being a righteous man, tries to do the right thing.

According to the law, the right thing to do would have been to expose Mary, publicly charge her, publicly renounce her and let the public punish her, probably by stoning her. But in this case, Joseph doesn't want to do what the law said is

"right." For him, the right thing is the compassionate thing, so he tries to avoid the scandal by dismissing her quietly.

Now I'm sure that God appreciates that Joseph is trying to show some kindness to Mary. But God doesn't want Joseph to do just the compassionate thing; God wants him to do the heroic thing. So God sends a messenger to speak to Joseph in a dream. And, as all the angels in the Bible do, this messenger tells Joseph not to be afraid.

As I was reading this, I was thinking, if I'd been Joseph, I'm not sure fear would be my first reaction. I think it might be anger or pain. So, if I'd been the angel, I might have added: don't be hurt by what has happened to you and don't be angry at Mary. She hasn't done this *to* you. Believe it or not, she's done it *for* you. God has a plan and you are an important part of it. So, take this unwed mother as your wife and name her child Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins."

[Matthew 1:21]

Plan or no plan, from Joseph's perspective, the incarnation was one big life complication. God is telling Joseph to love, in spite of all the reasons not to love. God is telling Joseph to forgive Mary when he has every right to forget her. God is telling Joseph to welcome her child even though that child will complicate his life immensely. So, we know what God is telling Joseph, but are we ready for what Joseph is telling us?

Jesus came to us as a baby, every bit as demanding as a newborn. And following him is, to say the least, complicated. You see, the Pharisees were already doing the "right" thing. And anyone can do the compassionate thing. But Jesus wants his followers to do the "God" thing, to love in spite of. In other words, Jesus wants us to love those who are the very most difficult to love, who don't deserve in the least to be loved. Jesus wants us to love when we don't know what it will end up costing us and when there's no return on our investment.

Jesus wants us to go into places and situations where love is absent so that we can make Jesus present.

So, the real scandal in this story is not an out-of-wedlock birth, but an out-of-this-world kind of love. The kind of love that will sometimes feel like it's killing you while it's saving you. I've seen that kind of love many times in my ministry. I've known a grandma who rescued her grandchildren from the run-down trailer of her drug-addicted son and started raising a second family when she was in her sixties. I've seen a mom adopt her sister's two children to get them out of an abusive situation. I've known a father, a guard at San Quentin, still loving his son after he was arrested for armed robbery. I watched two pillars of the church cry on the inside when their daughter, a teenaged run-away, whose whereabouts had been unknown for weeks, showed up in church one Sunday morning, sporting blue-green hair, nose rings and a new boyfriend.

Just goes to show you that even if we never leave the church building, the love of God can take us places we never thought we'd have to go. That's why I've never thought of church as a comfort zone. In fact, I find that church is often the place where love can be the hardest because here is where we set the bar the highest.

My friends, this is where loving gets pretty challenging and complicated, and the stories we tell don't have fairy tale endings. Frank Schaefer could tell you one of those stories. Frank is an ordained United Methodist clergy serving in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. In 2007, his son came to him and said that he and his partner wanted to get married and asked him to officiate at the wedding. Now, Frank knew what the church would say is the right thing to do. But this was his own son, flesh of his flesh, and he knew what was the compassionate thing to do. All he had to figure out was the God thing to do. So, Frank took the words of the angel to heart.

He chose not to be afraid to go where love was needed most, to take the risk, even though he couldn't calculate the cost.

As you know, Methodist clergy are not allowed to perform same-sex marriages. So, eventually, charges were filed against him and last month, Frank was put on trial. A jury of his peers found him guilty and gave him a 30-day suspension during which he was to discern whether or not he could live by the Discipline of the United Methodist Church in its entirety. I'm sure that in those thirty days, he had many conversations with God and with his children as well, because three of the four of them are gay. He also received hundreds of letters from supporters, colleagues, even three bishops, urging him not to surrender his credentials.

At the end of 30 days, he told the jury that he considered the Discipline's stance on homosexuality to be discriminatory and, in good conscience, could not abide by it. But the trial had no fairy tale ending. On Thursday, the jury voted to remove



him from the ministry. Of course, the media was all over it.

Breaking news from the United Methodist Church just in time for Christmas.

Friends, the trial has concluded, but the case is not closed. And the struggle to love in spite of is never over. Poor Joseph didn't know what he was getting into. When it comes to children coming into our lives and Jesus coming into our lives, none of us do. So, the angel's message to Joseph is my Christmas message to you: love is complicated, yes, but do not be afraid to take the next step in faith, trusting that the God who loved us enough to come in the flesh for us is the same God who will, step by step, day by day, trial by trial, come into our flesh and pour into our hearts grace upon grace, giving us everything we need to do everything God commands us to do: love in spite of. Amen.