



Joseph, a Righteous Man

TEXT
Matthew 1:18–25

June 16, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I talked to my Dad yesterday. He's slowing down; can't get to church anymore. He takes two or three naps a day. But he is still as positive as ever. In 1967, he taught me that a Clete Boyer to Felix Millan to Felipe Alou double play was scored 5-4-3 — and that was particularly sweet if it were against the Dodgers.

In 1977, Dad taught me to change the oil in my car every 3,000 miles. It was a '67 Mercury station wagon with wood-grain paneling on the side; not the first choice for a first car, but it was mine. When I was seven, he told me that the best way to catch a bird was to sprinkle salt on the bird's tail. He lied about that.

A dozen years ago, I took my son Nathan fishing. We were fishing in a canoe. Both of us were very new to fishing, and even more new to a canoe. He caught a northern pike as long as my arm. I used a net to land it, or canoe it, and in the process, the fish and the lure and the net became a tangled mess. I had them between my feet, trying to free him. If you have caught a pike before, you know they are living evidence that there is no orthodontist in the fish world.

While I was busy with this, Nathan caught another fish. He swung the pole toward me to let me remove it from the lure. When he did, the fishhook caught on my pant leg. It didn't catch me, but it caught on my pant leg so that the fish was flopping on my leg, the two of us unable to escape each other. I had a pike bouncing at my feet and a small-mouth bass flapping on my leg. I was clearly not going to produce my own fishing show. Nathan, fearing that the fishhook had caught me, said, "Tell me what to do. I don't know what to do, just tell me what to do."

I said, "How about just stop fishing for a moment."

I tell you that story because I imagine you have been in situations where you didn't know what to do, and you just wish someone could tell you what to do. It's a pretty common experience.

Joseph had a moment like that. To fully understand the implications of this story, we have to remember that Joseph lived not only in a different time, but in a different culture. In the ancient world, they treated women differently than we do now, at least in many ways. In the ancient world, they treated pregnancy outside of marriage differently

than we do now. In the ancient world, honor and shame were part of every action. And Joseph, like every other human being in human history, was a product of the time and culture in which he lived.

Mary was pregnant. Normally, that would be good news, but Joseph wasn't the father, as the story goes. Joseph reasonably assumes Mary has been promiscuous. So, what should he do? Jewish law provided an answer. If a woman is accused of being promiscuous, the matter is brought before the elders. If it is shown that her husband is lying, the husband will be required to pay a fine of 100 shekels of silver. The fine is paid to the woman's father, because it is the father's honor that has been assaulted. But if the charge is true, the woman is to be taken to the door of her father's home, and the men of the village gather to stone her to death. And then, the Torah says, in so doing, you shall purge the evil from your midst.

That's the way some think about dealing with evil. You purge it. You remove it. You wall it off. You create separation between you and evil.

But purging evil is hard to accomplish because so often the act of purging results in unrighteousness.

teous consequences. It happens more than we think: Doing the right thing fails to produce righteousness.

Mary was pregnant. What do you do in this circumstance? Joseph could have had her put to death, but Joseph is a righteous man. So, he decided to put her away quietly. But the story doesn't end there. It says Joseph had a dream, and in this dream he realizes God does not want him to put her away. So, Joseph makes the decision to remain with Mary and to raise her son as his own.

This took courage, because the law said the evil must be purged from your midst. But had Joseph cast Mary aside, we don't know what the results would have been, but it wouldn't have been righteous. Purging evil is never as easy as it sounds.

When I was a kid, I needed to have my tonsils removed. To put me to sleep, they didn't give me an IV. The nurse placed a cone over my face to administer ether. I didn't like the smell, so I protested in my 5-year-old voice: "It stinks!"

My nurse, my caregiver, deceived me. She said, "Blow it away." That seemed reasonable. I took a deep breath ... that's the last thing I remember. In trying to blow it away, I took in that which I hated. I could not purge the evil. She said, "Blow it away," and I just sucked it in. Nurse Ratched.

Joseph knew he couldn't purge evil. We aren't told his thought process; we are just told of his decision. Joseph decides not to discard Mary, but to marry her and to raise her

son as his own. Joseph chooses what scholars describe as a higher righteousness. It's not a righteousness that comes easily because it's not a righteousness that focuses on the law, but rather on the relationship. To say this more clearly, this higher righteousness pays attention to the consequences. Sometimes the policy, while well intended, can result in unintended consequences. Sometimes the rule can lead us to rotten results. Sometimes doing what seems right by the law can result in a lack of righteousness. Knowing this, Joseph, with courage and wisdom, decides not to put Mary away. That would fulfill the law, but it wouldn't fulfill righteousness. Righteousness requires attention to relationship.

The righteousness of Jesus is a righteousness that is sought not by purging evil, but by choosing relationship.

In the early moments of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "You have heard it said, but I say to you ..."

"You have heard it said, 'Do not kill,' but I say to you, do not be angry with your brother or sister.

"You have heard it said, 'Do not swear falsely,' but I say to you, do not swear at all ... let your yes be yes and your no be no.

"You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say, turn the other cheek.

"You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, love your enemy."

Jesus quotes the Torah: "You have heard it said ..." but then he shows that we cannot make the rule too simple; we cannot make the law too pedestrian. Righteousness doesn't come that easily. Righteousness is not found in obeying the law; it is found in paying attention to the relationship.

My Dad taught me to tithe. It started with my allowance; ten percent went to the church. When I got my first job, a dishwasher at Western Sizzlin, a job that taught me to eat elsewhere, still ten percent went to the church. It's a practice I maintain even today.

He taught me to look people in the eye when you speak to them. He taught me to drive the speed limit — not simply because it was the law, but because the Williams' kids, Randy and Susan, lived down the street, and we all needed to drive carefully.

When I read this story about Joseph, it reminds me a little bit of my Dad because he thinks like this too. It's never enough to simply follow the rules; you have to pay attention to relationships.

Danny Martin and I were throwing a baseball. His yard was too much of a hill, and our yard had too many trees, so we ended up throwing the ball in the Van Arsdale's yard. Their yard was wide open. Mr. Van Arsdale didn't like it, but he hadn't liked much since the 1950s became the 1960s. But he was at work. Mrs. Van Arsdale said it would be fine.

And it would have if Danny could throw straight. It was all his fault. Somehow, I don't remember all the details, but somehow the baseball ended up

in the Van Arsdale's living room. Point of entry was that big window over the couch.

We decided it was time to stop playing baseball and ran home.

That night, my Dad came in my room and told me \$78; that's what it would cost me to pay for Mr. Van Arsdale's window. My Dad would loan it to me so that I could pay it today, and I would have to repay my Dad through allowance and odd jobs cutting grass.

"OK," I said.

Then he said, "Here, take the money to Mr. Van Arsdale." He said, "You need to tell him you are sorry and that you won't do it again."

"But Dad, I don't want to talk with him. He's not a nice man."

My Dad said, "I can't argue with that; he's pretty grumpy. But this is not about who he is; this is about who you are. You need to take him this money and apologize."

It wasn't just about making the window right. It was about making the relationship right. And it wasn't about him; it was about me.

That's how my Dad thinks. He probably learned to think like that because his whole life he has paid attention to how Jesus thinks, and that's how Jesus thinks. I imagine Jesus learned to think like this from Joseph.

In the most significant moment in Joseph's life — when he learned Mary was pregnant — Joseph could have followed the rules and purged evil from his life. But Joseph knew righteousness was more than following

the rules; it is being persistent in relationship.

So, he did what many would never have had the ability to imagine: He married her and raised her son as if he were his own. Because that's the kind of man Joseph was.

No wonder God chose Joseph to raise his own son.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.