

**REVERING JOSEPH** - 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent Yr. A Sermon, 12/23/07  
by Dan Stern, Broadview Community UCC – Matthew 1: 18-25

The gospel of Matthew sounds so confident, makes it seem from the start so very definitive: “The birth of Jesus took place like this.” Actually, 2,000 – plus years later, how that birth took place is still in large part a mystery. That’s a good thing. We’re supposed to forever get lost in wonder, not to have it all wrapped up and figured out. And part of the holiness of faithful wondering is to keep being curious, to keep asking our inner child ‘what if’s’ and how come’s’. So today let’s take a few minutes to raise a few probing questions about an often-neglected figure at the manger scene: that of the papa, the peasant-carpenter, Joseph.

The simple 15<sup>th</sup> century lullaby-like carol we sang about Joseph, I’m happy to note, has resurfaced in our New Century hymnal after having been absent in most hymnals for centuries. Originally entitled in German, *Yoseph Lieber, Yoseph Mein*, it had been reinserted in the Episcopal hymnal of 1940, but was taken back out of the 1989 update. Most folks never really had a chance to get used to it. Why is it that so few carols focus on Joseph, and why do the ones we have get so-widely ignored? Why so little attention in general on Joseph? “When company comes over to the house, Joseph, like some old eccentric uncle,” (Gallop) seems to get shuffled to the sidelines, out of sight and out of mind. Why is this?

It’s true that through most of the history of mainstream Western Christendom, Joseph has not been given much attention. The Eastern Orthodox Church did kind of “keep him in deep freeze” on their calendars and iconography. Then when the Roman Church’s awful military campaigns against both mosques and churches of the East took place, the ones so blasphemously called ‘Crusades’, the icon of Joseph was confiscated, a stolen trophy of those invading imperialistic theocrats. But Joseph was not put out for public view or veneration at all until the then-counter-cultural Franciscans managed to get him onto their own calendar. Eventually, given the pressure of his increasing popularity among ordinary commoners, Joseph was given the lowest rank feast status ever-so-reluctantly by Pope Sixtus IV. Later, Theresa of Avila pushed devotion to him, getting the Carmelite order to take him as their patron, and in spite of persistently disparaging remarks coming from Rome, Joseph gradually became the patron saint of average everyday tradesfolk, workers, travelers, refugees, the persecuted, families, homes, engaged couples, the poor, the aged, the dying, the distressed, and even became the patron saint of good old Canada! But to the power elite of the larger institutional Church, Joseph’s popularity always seemed like a threat, and was thoroughly resisted.

Why such reluctance to give him his due? Why such institutional awkwardness and embarrassment about this man?

For one thing, the hierarchical powers parts of Christendom never did hear it as good news that Jesus was parented by a peasant carpenter in the first place. Such facts seem like good news for the poor, yes, but not good news for the privileged, powerful or rich. Jesus’ peasant upbringing was always more than most kings and popes could stomach. They knew if they could sufficiently de-emphasize his crass earthly poverty, looking only to his heavenly divinity, his being part of a neat metaphysical triangular godhead high up in the sky, it might just distract the masses sufficiently from the things Jesus really did say and do and stand for, like the way he demonstrated how camels can’t get through the eyes of needles, and told rich people they needed to sell everything. Propaganda like that is dangerous to the rich and powerful! So – one solution? Have people think Jesus was only divine, not really human at all. And by all means, keep his commoner carpenter peasant papa out of the limelight!

There's also been, in case you haven't noticed, a strong, institutional church bias against pretty much all things sexual. In the prudish thinking of some, it had to have been a virgin birth, don't you know, because had Jesus been a product of that dirty little secret 3-letter s-e-x thing, Jesus could not possibly be considered divine in the least. When one wrongly takes on this attitude, poor Joseph just doesn't belong in the picture at all! God's the father after all! The conception? Immaculate! And Joseph? Why, he must have just been a too-loyal irrelevant bumbling old fool. I mean, imagine it: Joseph discovers his beloved wife-to-be...is pregnant! And it wasn't by him! So if he had not had sexual relations with her, who had? The situation did not look good. The old boy network must have really put him down for it. Why, Joseph must not have been much of a man in the first place! Some have even blatantly and disparagingly portrayed Joseph as a cuckold. The word cuckold is the old fashioned Middle English word for a man whose wife has committed adultery. The word derives from the French word for cuckoo, a species of bird which leaves its eggs in the nest of other birds.

Men of every class have tended to react overly-defensively. Cruel, Institutionally-sanctioned jealous violence is, unfortunately, a major part of the history of my own gender. Joseph could easily have put Mary to shame. One word from him, and Mary would have been dragged into court, accused publicly of adultery, even sentenced to be stoned to death for it. Every male was given that kind of prerogative over every female. Brutality was the most widespread practice; in far too many places and situations, it still is. But Joseph was different than that. He loved Mary, and no matter what she'd done, he knew he didn't want her to die. So male privilege, brut force, patriarchal misogynist violence, societal option #1, was not given serious consideration at all. Joseph was far too decent and kind a man to do anything of the sort.

His second option was to quietly leave her. The option of evading responsibility. Before he had his dream, Joseph thought this to be the best solution, a "just" solution, a "fair" thing to do, since society sanctioned it. He could avoid scandal by "putting her away quietly"; it was perfectly legal in those days for a man to divorce "his" wife at any time, for pretty much any reason he chose. Not the other way around, of course, which is why Jesus spoke out against divorce, because it was not equally applied, and often without cause, left women entirely bereft. Mary might have managed to get away somewhere to have her baby in quiet obscurity. "At least that way, she would not be sentenced to death by an all-male hanging jury for the crime of making love without a license." (Gallop) But I don't really think Joseph was happy with this 2<sup>nd</sup> option either. Mary would have suffered in isolation from her loved ones, she would have been banished from her culture and people, she would have lived, if she made it at all, on the edge of all resources and respectability somewhere in a faraway place. Joseph didn't want to be separated from her; he didn't want either of them to suffer or be lonely. And yet he didn't think he had any other choice. He didn't think so, that is, until the other option, Joseph's third option, came to him in a dream.

People named Joseph in the Bible tend to be great dreamers, and I think this Joseph deserves to be revered as such; he is a saintly visionary, a seer of options that have not previously been considered, and one who heard an angel's voice saying "do not fear". Forego your patriarchal "right" to be a total patriarchal jerk. Get married, the angel says, it'll be okay; hold her child in your arms, nurture him up unto adulthood, it will be the greatest privilege any man could ever hope to have. Not only will you get to save the reputation of the one you are engaged to and in love with, but you will get to hold the very Liberator of the World in your very arms, and kiss his little carpenter apprentice blisters well, and you'll get to call him your own, get to name him according to your own family's name. "By adopting this child as your own, you will graft onto your family tree his genetic

code, which carries the Name of Liberation.” (Gallop) Minus your fears, you will become the way for God to be with us all, because you will have parented The Very Child of God!

“Do not fear.” There, in three little words, is the whole message of Christmas too. The world we live in is a phobia-filled, fear-full place. Men, women, children, all of us, are intimidated by fearful news, and often by what other people think of us. The patriarchal system which Joseph decides not to opt for still has a stranglehold on much of the human community. The pregnant young girl is still victimized, new ways are thought of to put her to shame, to divorce her from dignity and from caring consideration. So we do well to ask, even to pray with Mary, ‘Gentle Joseph, Joseph dear, stay with me, for the baby’s near; God will surely your goodness hear, as you will love this newborn child, says Mary.’ She had to have been pretty convincing, because adopting a child who was not one’s own blood kin was anathema in those days. Which is just one more reason why church and society at its most corrupt stages ignored Joseph so thoroughly, and put down the memory of him so forcefully. Because he demonstrated the possibility of not having to do things the way society told him he had to – of not having to be fearful, jealous, selfish, arrogant and violent. The human family as a whole has not caught on, not caught on at all to the bankruptcy of violence. (Phil Berrigan) Violence is, was, always will be bankrupt, antihuman, criminal – always!” But Joseph manages to live another way, a gentler, more humane way, which was neither to be violent nor to run away. It’s what all the great saints of the earth have managed to do too: to find a third way, one which is neither violent nor cowardly. Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi, King, Rosa Parks, Dorothy Day, The Berrigan brothers, Cesar Chavez...and, I would add, Joseph, Jesus’ own far-too-long sidelined, ever-so-loving papa.

The angel told Joseph in that dream of his to fear not, and Joseph managed to do the right thing, and not to be afraid of what anybody else thought about him. Joseph along with Mary, ushered in and nurtured up an out of wed *locked* future whose name was Jesus. For centuries, Joseph has been put down as not being man enough because he chose to stay with the one woman he loved, to co-parent at least one child who apparently wasn’t his by blood, and to not take advantage of his presumed male prerogative to resort to jealous rage and violence. Thank God! The world’s a far better place because of Joseph.

So...Be like Joseph, and do not fear. “Christmas comes to give each member of the human family a chance to reconsider options, to carry all (our questions to God and) to the angels of our dreams, and to listen for the voices which speak the Messiah’s message: do not be afraid to forego inherited privileges. Whether they be privileges or distinctions based upon race, family, citizenship, money, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, cosmetic beauty, training, education, religion – what is being conceived in all of us at this holy time is a Name which means ‘God With Us’ – God with all of us”, no barriers, no distinctions. It’s the Christmas message, and right at the heart of our own church’s *God is Still Speaking* campaign too. Joseph didn’t turn people away. Neither, did Jesus. Neither, in turn, are we to do. We don’t sing O Come, SOME of ye faithful. Whoever you are or wherever you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome. Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door, and see all the people. All the people...ALL the people. How the power elite scaredy-cats turn over in their proverbial graves when we really act that equally and inclusively! But let ‘em. As for the rest of us, we’d rather be like Joseph, pay attention the dream, and not to fear to do what those in charge claim we must not do.

“Gladly Mary, Mary mine. I will cradle the child divine, and here will heaven and earth combine, for you will bear God’s child, O dearest Mary.”

Come, Lord Jesus (heal the nations,) and free us soon from all fears. Amen.