

A Regular Joe: The Fourth Sunday of Advent – Matthew 1:18-25
The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson, St. Francis Church, December 19, 2010

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in the darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of Wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(The Book of Common Prayer, pg. 832)

Some of you may remember Spike Lee's 1989 film, *Do the Right Thing*, which unfolds amid racial tensions in a Brooklyn neighborhood. The film ends with two quotations. The first, from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., states that violence is never justified, under any circumstances. "Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love," said Dr. King. The second quote comes from Malcolm X, who said "I am not against using violence in self-defense. I don't even call it violence when it's self-defense, I call it intelligence." Lee leaves it at that. Life is complicated. It's hard enough to "do the right thing," *but sometimes the even harder part is in figuring out what the right thing is to do.* I think what makes that film so brilliant is that Lee gets that, and therefore chooses to leave us, the audience, to wrestle with the question.

There are times in our lives when it is very clear what we need to do, even though it may be difficult to find the courage and fortitude to do it. It is hard to act in accordance with our stated convictions and core values, but it may be harder still when we are genuinely unclear about the way forward. In those times, what we really need is help in figuring out what the right thing is. Is violence always wrong, or is it sometimes a necessary "self-defense?" To ask that kind of question we need wisdom and insight and discernment. Or we may have a friend whose addiction problems are out of control: do we err on the side of not rocking the boat too much (so at least they will know they are not alone and that we do care about them) or on the side of "tough love" that sets clear boundaries (and holds them accountable for their bad choices?) So much depends on the circumstances, on context, and a whole lot of factors that may be beyond our understanding. At such times, before we can "do the right thing," we need to figure out what the right thing is.

Joseph, we are told in today's gospel reading, was, "a righteous man." In Greek the word is "*dikaios*." It's translated into English as "just" or as "justified" as often as "righteous"—and it is a fairly common word in the New Testament, especially in St. Paul's writings. *What exactly does it mean to be a "just" or "righteous" person?* I suspect that if you asked most Christians, across generational and denominational lines, they would say that it is basically about trying to do our best to follow God's commandments as they are revealed in the Scriptures. But in the case of Joseph, there is a text in the Torah that is quite explicit, given the situation in which he finds himself. It seems pretty clear what he is supposed to do, if he is in fact a "righteous man."

Mary and Joseph were *engaged*—although something gets lost in translation here when we move into English and our twenty-first century context. In first-century Palestine, to be "betrothed" was a legally binding arrangement that could be dissolved only by death or divorce. In other words, Mary and Joseph were already as good as married. And so *if* Mary has been "sleeping around" (and all the evidence Joseph has seems to suggest she has) then she has committed adultery. So what is the right thing to do here? How would a righteous man act? The Bible says that adultery is punishable by death.

A Regular Joe: The Fourth Sunday of Advent – Matthew 1:18-25
The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson, St. Francis Church, December 19, 2010

If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones. (Deuteronomy 22:23-24)

Now we must be very clear here: in the first century, Jews were not going around stoning adulterers. The rabbis had *interpreted* the text as belonging to another time and place, and softened the blow quite a bit. They were not Biblical literalists. Still, adultery was considered a very serious sin and those who committed it were publicly humiliated and shamed, even if not stoned. The practice, in other words, was to make public what had happened in private. A scarlet letter worked as well as stoning to ostracize a person from “polite” society and make her as good as dead to the community.

Keep in mind that Joseph still believes at this point in the story that he has been wrongfully betrayed: that his honor has been violated. He must have felt incredibly hurt, humiliated, and angry. One could certainly understand his desire to lash out. But beyond that he can, as a religious person, justify his desire for retaliation by quoting Scripture! He can say not only that he has every “right” to expose Mary to public humiliation and that it’s a form of “tough love,” but that it’s his “religious duty.” He can say that is the “will of God” and that these aren’t his rules, but God’s, because it says so, right in the Bible! In spite of how the rabbis were interpreting Deuteronomy 22 in Joseph’s day, he could have pushed for a return to “that old time religion” and gotten a bumper sticker for his car that said: “*Bring back stoning: God said it, I believe it, that settles it.*”

But of course Joseph didn’t do that. He could have listened to the conventional interpretations being given by the rabbis of his day and exposed Mary to public disgrace. This decision would had the advantage of being “in the mainstream.” With the full backing of the religious authorities, Joseph could have claimed the moral high ground by *publically* divorcing Mary, so that everyone in town would know that he had been wronged. He had every right to do that, even if it wasn’t the right thing to do. But of course he didn’t do that either. Even before he has this dream, Joseph discerns a higher calling than following the letter of the law, even a law already mitigated by the rabbis. Joseph decides that he is “*unwilling* to expose Mary to public disgrace.” He decides that the “right thing” here is to dismiss her quietly. And Matthew declares that the reason he did this, the reason he went against the conventional wisdom, was because he was a “righteous man.”

How can it be that a person makes a decision that is counter to the Law, and that he is still considered to be a just person? Matthew seems to be suggesting here that it is. That doesn’t mean that he is dismissing the Law entirely. In fact, more than any of the four gospel writers, Matthew writes as a Jew, to Jews, with the utmost respect for Torah. In Matthew’s telling of the story, Jesus comes not to abolish the Law but to *fulfill* it. Jesus will remind his disciples what is spelled out in the Old Testament itself: that the whole of the Torah can be summed up in the command to love God and to love neighbor. If we want to “do the right thing,” we can’t just pick one text and stick with it. We have to engage in prayer and discernment with a living, holy, merciful God. We have to learn how to trust the Holy Spirit to form and guide our conscience and to guide us into all truth. We also have to be self-aware, because the potential for self-deception is always great. Above all, we need love. And so today we light that fourth candle: love. Joseph seems to believe that a “respect for the dignity of every human being” includes even the woman he feels has betrayed and deceived him and hurt him. His “righteousness” is tied to preserving her *dignity*. Joseph chose mercy and love over public humiliation, *because he was a righteous man...*

A Regular Joe: The Fourth Sunday of Advent – Matthew 1:18-25
The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson, St. Francis Church, December 19, 2010

But no sooner has he made up his mind than it all becomes moot: his decision has been made when out of no where the whole story shifts, and an angel appears to Joseph in a dream. (Poor Joseph; unlike Mary and the shepherds and even George Bailey, he doesn't get a real angel—with or without wings; just a *dream* of an angel!) What he learns from this dream is huge, however: *he has it all wrong*. He thought he had the facts right and his decision seemed compassionate based on a logical reading of the evidence. After all, Mary is pregnant and he knows he's not the father. But then the angel tells him that this pregnancy is the work of the Holy Spirit and not of an adulterous affair at all. Mary has in fact not betrayed him. And that changes everything.

This, too, is a part of the moral life, is it not? We make ethical choices not as people who are omniscient, but as people who come to decisions based on the best information we have available to us at the time, information that at best we see through a glass darkly. And sometimes we are just plain wrong. Sometimes we leap to the wrong conclusions. Often when we do (and especially if we feel hurt or vulnerable or angry) we act less nobly than Joseph was about to act. But now Joseph changes his plans based on a dream. And here, too, he had choices. After waking up he very easily could have said, "I'm never eating stuffed peppers again!" He could have told himself: "it was just a dream, and what a bizarre one at that. I can't wait to tell it to my therapist!" But that, of course, isn't what he does. Joseph *acts* and does the two things his dream angel tells him to do: he takes Mary as his wife and then he names the child *Yeshua*—Jesus—Savior. In so doing, Joseph is claiming the child as his very own son.

Sometimes we have a hard time connecting to the people of the Bible. But we should be clear that regardless of what we say about the peculiar nature of this particular birth, Joseph was neither the first nor the last man to ever find himself in a situation like this. He is, I think in a real sense, *a regular Joe*: an ordinary, everyday hero who is just trying to do the right thing.

How do you know when to trust your dreams and act on them? How do you discern what is a message from God, and what is really a temptation from the Evil One? I don't have any easy answers for you on that. All I can tell you is that Joseph trusted his dream as more real than what his rational brain told him and as more important than what all the gossiping neighbors were whispering about Mary. Maybe the dream confirmed what his heart was telling him and he wanted to live into that reality. All we can say for sure is that Joseph acted out of love and he stuck with Mary in spite of any lingering doubts, and that he gave her son his name and then raised him his own. Adoptive parents know well both the challenges and potential joys of such a decision. But do well to remember that this decision will almost certainly be costly to Joseph's reputation and his standing in the community—and very few people beyond Mary herself will ever be able to appreciate the sacrifice he has made in doing the right thing, the hard thing. It will win him no medals, and almost certainly the whispering will go on in that small town for decades. *Mamzer*—they will call Jesus, in spite of Joseph's actions: *illegitimate*.

In hindsight, as followers of Jesus, it's easy to see why Joseph deserves to be called a "righteous man." But what truly amazes me is that Joseph was able to get it right the first time around, without the benefit of 20/20 hindsight—even before he ever held that babe wrapped in swaddling clothes in his arms.