

“FINDING LOVE”

Matthew 1:18-25; I John 4:7-16

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To abide in God is to abide in love. We are coming to see this connection between God and love as being at the core of our faith. We understand marriage as a relationship of love between two people. We devote ourselves to loving one another within the faith community, and to loving our neighbors beyond our community.

How odd, then, that the birth narratives speak so little of love. The Gospel of John speaks about a word made flesh, about God becoming one of us and living among us. Even though the imagery itself illustrates a relationship of love, John speaks only of grace and truth, of life and light; but the word, “love,” is absent from the text.

Luke’s version is filled with tenderness, with intimate details, but his story emphasizes the joy of the occasion. The shepherds leave us in awe at what God is to accomplish through this child, but the closest we come to love is the statement that “Mary pondered these words in her heart.”

And then there’s Matthew’s version which seems more like an arranged marriage than a relationship infused with love. There is kindness, but no reference to love in Joseph’s thought to dismiss Mary quietly. Gabriel offers a persuasive reason for going through with the marriage, but makes no appeal to love.

The story is really all about the child. John makes no mention of Mary and Joseph. Luke gives us a beautiful portrait of Mary, of her cooperation with God’s plan and sense of joy in the birth, but Joseph barely gets a mention. Matthew tells the story from Joseph’s perspective, barely mentioning Mary, but the dream and the angel seem more manipulative than invitational.

Joseph appears to have little choice in the matter. If Joseph loves Mary, it’s hidden behind the command to take Mary as his wife. One could refuse an angel, I suppose. Abraham appeals to the angels of the Lord for mercy on behalf of Sodom. Moses argues with God over the fate of the disobedient Israelites. David prays for the life of the first child conceived by Bathsheba. Job pleads his case for many, many chapters with God. Jonah initially refuses to go to Nineveh as God commanded. So it’s not unheard of for people to dither with God about the future.

But Joseph is not like any of these people. He is a righteous man, we are told; and so, he thinks to dismiss Mary quietly. He cannot follow through with the wedding when the evidence suggests that Mary has been unfaithful. He would be within his rights to make a public spectacle of her, but he doesn’t. Is this, one wonders, an act of kindness stemming from his “righteousness,” or could there be some affection that calls forth a milder response?

I can be a little sentimental when it comes to the birth of Jesus. I have talked in years past about looking into the manger, about seeing the infant who gives evidence of God's love for us and calls forth love from us. It's a beautiful and sweet image that sometimes brings tears to the eye. It's why I prefer Luke's story to Matthew's. It's why when I read Matthew's story, the question that matters to me is: "Does Joseph love Mary?"

We know that Joseph is righteous and that he believes in the dream, like his counterpart in Genesis. The purposes of God are advanced by the dream. The couple are married, the child is born, and the people will be saved from their sins, whatever that means. But, as many of you know, I like to go off-script. I like to ask questions that the text isn't asking. The romantic in me wants to know if Joseph loves Mary. I fully admit that Matthew doesn't care.

The birth of Jesus in all the gospel accounts is purposeful. It's not that love lacks purpose, but the birth is told as part of a plan, part of God's plan to accomplish something. In John it's an invitation to become children of God. In Luke it's an invitation to celebrate the beginning of the final act of salvation. And in Matthew, it's about the restoration of the covenant, the offer of forgiveness for God's people. The emphasis is on what God is doing.

Even though the story doesn't explicitly mention love, it isn't difficult to find love in what God is doing. That the God of the universe enters our world as Emmanuel, God with us, is love. That this God, in living among us, would "save us from our sins," would forgive us in the midst of all our unfaithfulness, is love. All of Jesus' life, from manger to cross to resurrection, the teaching, the healing, the forgiving, the feeding, are acts of love.

And yet there is something about Jesus that is not fully accessible. Could be the historical distance of two millennia? Could be his failure to mess up even once? Fully human? Yes! One of us? Maybe not quite. His teaching seems at times beyond us. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Most days, I fall short of the standard. Finding love in Jesus, there is grace and truth in that. Nothing moves me more deeply in my faith than this birth. But if I can't find love in Joseph, I have to wonder whether the love of God can abide in me.

So I wonder, does Joseph love Mary? You know the story of Joseph the dreamer, a different Joseph from Israel's past. His father gives him a coat of many colors. His brothers, filled with envy, sell him into slavery. He has ups and downs as a slave in Egypt. His dreams eventually lead, to a position of influence. He is in charge of the grain distributions, an extremely important post in the midst of famine. When his brothers seek relief from the famine in Egypt, he plays a little game with them. We are left wondering whether he will throw them in prison or offer the relief they need. When he finally reveals himself, his brothers are struck with terror, until he forgives them, assuring them that what they meant for evil, God used for good, for the saving of his people, one might say, saving the brothers from their sin.

Joseph, husband of Mary, had dreams; dreams that brought the two together when obedience to the law might have separated them; dreams that later will make the family refugees in Egypt; dreams that will tell them when it is safe to return. At first Joseph intends to follow the law, to dismiss Mary, albeit quietly with kindness. Richard Rohr writes, "Mere obedience is far too often a detour around actual love. Obedience is usually about cleaning up, love is about waking up" (p. 73). That's where Joseph starts, but the dreams, ironically, "wake him up." I find love in the fact that he believes the angel, that he sees in this unconventional act the work of God. I find love in his concern for the safety of his family when he is warned of Herod's intent to kill the child, in his willingness to leave home and become a refugee. It could as well be a sense of duty that moves him, but "righteousness" in the Hebrew understanding, is more about love than obedience. Joseph loves Mary. Joseph loves Jesus. He doesn't say this, but he demonstrates it. His love I believe is rooted in God, just as all love finds its roots in God. "All human loves, passions, and preoccupations can prime the pump," writes Rohr, "and only in time do most of us discover the first and final source of those loves" (p. 75).

Just before Rohr says this, he writes, "God is not in competition with reality, but in full cooperation with it." That's why Joseph's love matters to me. Any plan, even a divine plan, that runs roughshod over people, isn't a "loving" plan. That God desires to have us flawed human beings as children and is willing to do so by becoming human and sharing in all the struggles of life, as John tells the story, is love. That God would invite instead of command Mary to participate in the story of salvation, as Luke tells the story, is love. That God awakens love within Joseph, well it may be an arranged marriage, but no shotgun was involved. Joseph goes willingly and freely. I find love in that.

I find love in the stories surrounding Jesus' birth, the love of God for us in the midst of our need and suffering. The cooperation of Mary and the flexibility of Joseph deepen that love, just as any experience of love draws us closer to God. Finding love in human experience awakens us to the love of God. That's why Joseph matters. That's why those who love us are so important. Spouses, children, parents, friends, communities of all sorts can be windows to the love of God. Where human and divine come together, there I find love. That's why Joseph matters. That's why you matter. Amen.

Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, And Believe*. Convergent Books: New York NY, 2021.