

## **The Excessive Right**

December 22, 2019

Matthew 1:18-25

On Feb. 28, 2015, my grandfather passed away. My family and I mourned the loss, as did much of the school district for whom he served on the school board for 42 years, up until the day he died. Later that year, having just graduated seminary and needing some more time to finish my ordination process, I went to New Orleans. I worked at a hospital, which doesn't close for the holidays. So, I wasn't allowed to go home. There were patients to see, after all. So, my first Christmas without my grandfather went by without even noticing.

The next year, that was a different story. Technically speaking, it was my second Christmas without him, but given that I didn't see any family that first Christmas, the absence went by unnoticed. Then, my second Christmas without him came, and the closer the special day came, the sadder and more alone I felt, and I realized why: because this was the first time his absence was recognizable. The rest of the family was there, but he was not. So, I went through that Christmas season, feeling very blue, feeling alone because, during this season of happiness and joy, I felt none of it. At that time, I knew nothing of Blue Christmas services, something I would have attended had I known about them.

We all know this pain: a first Christmas after a loved one has died, a first Christmas after a bad diagnosis or prognosis, a first Christmas without a job, a spouse, or kids in the house. It doesn't matter how bright the lights are or how they sparkle. It doesn't matter how loud Christmas songs on the radio or carolers at the door sing. It doesn't matter how big of a get-together you attend. It doesn't matter what Santa leaves under the tree for you. Many, if not all of us, know what it is to feel pain around this bright and glitzy holiday. Those who feel it, it is hard to see the brightness of the Advent candles when there's so much darkness around them. Those who know someone going through this time, it can be rough for you all as well, feeling helpless to shed any more light for the person feeling hopeless to feel hope.

So I imagine it was for Mary in the Nativity story. She is a young girl of 13, pure of heart and faithful to the God of Jacob. An angel of the Lord has visited her, telling her she will bear a son by way of the Holy Spirit. Being a faithful young woman, of course she accepts. Who is she to question or deny the request of the Triune God? However, she is still human. She has not yet been given away in marriage, meaning she is still the legal responsibility of her parents. If anyone were to find out about her pregnancy outside of marriage to Joseph, let alone that the child is not his, she would be publicly shamed. Her parents would be shamed and potentially cast her out of their home, leaving no one to care for her. Joseph has the opportunity to dismiss her, publicly shame her and her parents. Though she has been blessed with a gift beyond comparison, the reactions and assumptions based on cultural norms, the repercussions of what this could mean for her potentially cast a huge shadow upon her. We can assume that, during this time of preparing for Jesus' arrival, knowing what he will be, she still feels scared and alone. She is not the only one facing a strike against their joy in the story, though.

Today's story centers on Joseph and his being led to see what has transpired. At this point, he has found out that Mary, the pure maiden intended for his hand, has gotten pregnant

with a baby that is not his. So, presumably, she has cheated on him, proven herself deviant and impure, a disgrace upon herself, her family, and the baby. He has all the right to dismiss her, publicly no less, but he has decided not to. He has rather decided to dismiss her quietly, so that shame might not be brought down upon her and her family. We can assume at this moment he is feeling betrayed, possibly alone, as spousal affairs don't exactly make for good dinner conversations and for a "quiet dismissal" to work, he can't exactly talk to anyone about it. He might feel ashamed, as if God were punishing him with this for some sin he cannot recall. Yet, there is joy, for both of them no less.

The immediate joy comes to Joseph. An angel comes to him in a dream, telling him the child Mary carries is none other than the Savior of Humanity, endowed on her womb by the Holy Spirit and not the seed of another man. So, this child is a miracle, not a punishment. This is a sign of Mary's *faithfulness*, not *faithlessness*. He resolves instead to care for the infant as if it were his own. Mind you, he has no legal or moral obligation to do so. This child is not his, he does not have to raise it. Think then what joy Mary feels knowing that this Christ child will be raised by Joseph, that he will still take her hand in marriage, and that her unborn child will be raised with a father figure in the home. Joseph here has gone above and beyond what is called for in this case. The "right" thing to do is public dismissal. He already went a step beyond by looking into a private dismissal. Now, he's gone further still, deciding to raise the child as his own, knowing full-well it isn't, and to take Mary's hand in marriage. In short then, Joseph did something that was beyond just right, but was "excessively" right.

That is our challenge as the body of Christ, to do as Joseph does in this story. As written by Lauren Winner, "The Joseph story poses a fundamental ethical challenge that goes beyond the specifics of welcoming mothers: the challenge to exceed our culture's norms of standard-issue ethical behavior, and pursue a course of action that is excessively good, excessively generous." In the same interpretation of this passage, she writes later on as if to clarify, "Are our congregations embracing the culturally appropriate good deed (raising money at Christmastime to provide gifts for the children of incarcerated mothers, say), but not yet undertaking the bolder, riskier, more excessively good deed (welcoming a mother just released from prison into the congregation, in the ranks of Sunday school teachers, into our lunch bunch and church supper club)?" As I read through this explanation, I thought about what this might mean for us, Holiday Island Presbyterian Church, and I kept thinking about Claire and what we as a congregation could do that would be not just "right" but "excessively right." By definition, the "right" thing to do is to not talk to her if one is absolutely begrudging of her. If you can tolerate her, the "right" thing is to send her a Christmas card if not write "Happy Holidays," "Happy New Year," and/or "Merry Christmas" on her Facebook page. However, I wonder, what can we do to go that extra mile, to be "exceedingly good?" For those who hold strong grudges against her, whatever your reasons, the excessively right thing might be to at least forgive her if not also talk to her and see if you can find some closure with her. If you can tolerate her, maybe don't just send a card saying "Happy Holidays," but invite her to a church service here, invite her to a potluck or game night. Now, mind you, I don't know Claire, nor do I have a full understanding of everything she said and did to everyone, but I have to imagine that allowing her to find closure with us, if not attend church as a member, would bring her some joy during this holiday season, joy like Mary felt when she found out Joseph would care for Jesus as if he were his own.

Maybe your “excessively right” thing doesn’t have to do with Claire, but to every “right” decision, there is an “excessively right” decision. Rather than donating supplies for disaster relief, you could plan a trip to help with disaster relief. Instead of just donating to support the homeless/hungry, maybe you volunteer to work at ECHO, Cup of Love, or another non-profit. Why stop at donating a toy to a Christmas family when you can volunteer as Santa/Mrs. Claus? To every “right,” there is an “excessively right” action to take, both during and outside of the Advent and Christmas seasons. What is the “excessively right” thing for you personally to do in your life?