

Father Joseph

[Matthew 1:18-25, 2:13-15](#)

A Christmas Family Portrait

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I went through the Christmas section in our hymnal this week, looking for songs about Joseph. There aren't any. Songs about Mary and her babe abound, understandably. So do songs about shepherds, angels, and wise men, all of whom were supporting actors in the cast. But if anyone has penned a hymn in praise of Joseph, our hymnal doesn't include it; even though he too was a supporting actor, some would argue "the" supporting actor. I did find one short line in the song "The Snow Lay on the Ground:" "Saint Joseph too was by to tend the Child, to guard Him and protect His mother mild." But that's not much out of forty-one Christmas songs. Even the ox and ass get more attention than Joseph!

You won't find Joseph in great art either. In El Greco's "Adoration of the Shepherds," for instance, Joseph is conspicuously absent. In da Vinci's "Adoration of the Magi," Mary and the baby are surrounded by wise men and their retainers, while on the far left margin, there stands a man who may be Joseph, though no one is sure. While the others kneel, the man stands. And while others gaze at Mary and the baby with awe, the man watches with arms folded and his left hand on his chin, as if to say, "Can this really be happening?" Yet even if he is Joseph he is off on the side, ignored by da Vinci's wise men and, for that matter, by most Christians across the centuries.

If we had only Matthew's Gospel, we would think Joseph more important than Mary. For while Luke in his gospel focuses mainly on Mary, Matthew concentrates primarily on Joseph. In Luke the angel visits Mary. In Matthew the angel calls on Joseph. In Luke Mary is told "The Holy Spirit will come upon you." In Matthew Joseph is told, "The child conceived in Mary is from the Holy Spirit." In Luke Mary is told, "You will bear a son and you will name him Jesus." In Matthew Joseph is told, "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus." Certainly Jesus is the centerpiece in both birth narratives, but to hear Matthew tell it, Joseph is the most prominent figure in the supporting cast for at least three reasons.

First, because he was a man of high principle.

That's how the New English Bible describes Joseph: "Being a man of principle, Joseph desired to have the marriage contract set aside quietly."

Well, put yourself in his place. The only conclusion he could draw was that Mary had been unfaithful to him, that the child must be the fruit of her union with another man. So, out of high moral principle, he resolves to cancel the wedding.

No doubt Joseph would be considered too strait-laced today, a Puritan in a culture that has nothing good to say about Puritans, a stickler for sexual morality in an age that prides itself on its sexual freedom. On the other hand, Joseph might feel at home among today's teenagers, more and more of whom are rejecting the Playboy creed, "If it feels good, do it." A recent Newsweek magazine devoted its cover story to the rising tide of abstinence among young people. For a variety of reasons -- medical, spiritual, familial -- a growing number of teenagers are choosing to be chaste until their wedding day. Joseph would applaud that trend, because Joseph was a man of high principle.

And Joseph was a man of deep compassion: "Unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, (Joseph) planned to dismiss her quietly." The New English Bible is even more expressive: "Being a man of principle and at the same time wanting to save her from exposure, Joseph desired to have the marriage contract set aside quietly." So his justice was tempered with mercy, his high principles with deep compassion. You can understand why Joseph wanted to protect himself from scandal. At the same time he worked hard to save Mary from public humiliation.

His compassion speaks powerfully to fathers and mothers, to owners and managers, to anyone who stands in authority over others. Parents: learn from Joseph to search for a middle way between legalism and leniency. Many parents are lenient because they are afraid of their children. Others are too busy or too lazy to give them any moral guidance at all. So I hope you have high standards for your children and that you communicate those standards clearly and use appropriate discipline when necessary. At the same time I urge you to take Joseph as your paradigm for parenting, to wed compassion to your principles, to work hard at not shaming your children, at not making them feel unworthy of your love.

Some of you may have heard me tell of my psychologist friend who, when he disciplined his son, put his left arm around his shoulder, as if to say, "Son, you belong to me, you're part of the family, and nothing will ever change that!" Then he sticks his right finger in his son's face and says, "But I don't like the way you're behaving right now, so shape up!" Law and love, principle and compassion: it's a powerful blend. It will save children from shame and will save us from the sorrow of losing our children's respect.

One more thing about Joseph: He was a man of willing self-sacrifice.

Against his better judgment but at God's bidding he went ahead with the wedding and by so doing took Mary's shame upon himself. I expect his business suffered. Farmers turned to his competitor across town when they needed a new plow. Families wanting new dining room furniture ordered it from a firm in the town across the valley. Joseph knew the baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit, but how could he explain that to his clients? No, the angel's revelation about Mary's child was something Joseph would have to keep to himself because, with the exception of Mary, no one would believe, let alone understand, the truth about her pregnancy.

In my judgment, Joseph's self-sacrifice prepared Jesus for his infinitely greater self-sacrifice. For isn't it likely that Joseph and Jesus, working side by side in the carpenter shop, would open their hearts to one another? Can't you hear Joseph saying "Son, you've grown up under a cloud, and it's time I told you about the burden your mother and I have been carrying, about the scorn and contempt we've borne all these years. I married your mother so she would have a home and you would have the benefit of an earthly father, but it cost me. Oh, how it cost me! But I'm glad I did it, so your mother could have the support of a husband, and you could have the security of my heritage and family."

And can't you hear Jesus saying to himself on that last, dark night of his life in Gethsemane, "Thank God for Joseph's self-sacrifice in mother's behalf and mine." And then, after praying "Not my will but thine be done," rising to meet his captors and willingly moving toward his own cross to atone for your sins and mine.

No wonder Matthew devotes so much space to Joseph. Joseph stands tall as a man of principle, and even taller as a man of compassion. And when he sacrifices his own reputation for Mary and Mary's baby, he stands tallest of all, for by that self-sacrifice he prepared Jesus for the singular sacrifice by which we are reconciled to God.

If Joseph were in this pulpit today I think he would ask, "For whom have we sacrificed ourselves? Whose burdens have we lifted, whose dark secrets have we shared, whose fears have we borne, whose hunger have we fed, whose grief have we consoled, whose contempt have we taken on ourselves?"

And then Joseph would caution us: "If you do as I did, if, out of compassion, you sacrifice yourself in some way, don't expect much publicity. Because when the scene is filmed you may not even appear, and when the credits roll at the end your name may not be there. But that's okay. Mary's Son will know all about it, and on that day when all is revealed you can count on him to say both to Joseph and to you, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord.'"