

## **“Love Casts Out Shame”**

Matthew 1:18-25; Matthew 1:1-17 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – December 18, 2022  
Fourth Sunday of Advent ~ Love

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might really, truly believe that, in your Love, we are always enough. In the name of the One coming into the world, Amen.*

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There are two things that Matthew really wants us to know as begins his gospel. One of those things he says very explicitly. The other he says as clearly as possible by inviting us to read between the lines. But both of these truths are important for us to hold in our hearts as Christmas approaches. The first thing we need to know is that Jesus was very, very Jewish. In case you weren't clear just how very Jewish Jesus is, Matthew lays out the 40 generations of Jewish fathers leading up to Jesus' arrival in these first 17 verses I just read. He situates them in Jewish history, with relation to the reign of King David, one of the most prominent of these ancestors, and to the deportation to Babylon, which, as some of you have learned this fall in Bible Study, was one of the major formative events in ancient Jewish history.

At the conclusion of the story of Joseph's dream, we have the first of many instances of Matthew pointing out how Jesus' story is a fulfillment of Jewish scripture. The fact that his counting and translations and leaps of logic are a bit forced are not the point here. The first thing Matthew needs us to know is that Jesus is Jewish.

In this season when one of the central holidays of our faith has overtaken the public square – though mostly in secularized form – we would do well to keep in mind the Jewish roots of Christianity. This horse has left the barn, of course, but that doesn't have to stop us from holding Christmas gently and lightly by doing what we can to avoid assuming everyone is celebrating our festival. Hannukah begins tonight; we can refrain from treating it like "Jewish Christmas." It isn't. Hannukah is Hannukah. We can call out the false indignation that some of our siblings in the faith display when boundaries are put on Christmas celebrations and measures taken to make winter celebrations more inclusive. There is no War on Christmas; that is not the struggle our Jewish Lord would have us engage in. Christianity has not done a good job of honoring our Jewish roots, and there's never a bad time to reflect on and repent of that history.

But as I said, there are two things Matthew wants us to know about Jesus as this gospel begins, and his Jewish roots are just the first one. The other is a little more buried. Our central story today is about Joseph and how he dealt with the circumstances of Jesus' origin. We often forget just how perilous Mary's situation could have been. As a pregnant, engaged woman, she would have been suspected of adultery, which was punishable by death. In those times, as far too often still today, the woman would bear the brunt of the blame and shame, even if this pregnancy was the result of rape. Indeed, the fact that Joseph resolved to deal with it quietly, rather than holding the public trial the law called for, gives the impression that he probably

thought she had been. For a people living under imperial occupation, such occurrences must have been far too common. The most vulnerable always bear the highest cost of a violent society. Joseph knew this and was struggling to do the most righteous thing he could, in the face of scandal.

But Matthew gives us a prelude to the story of Joseph's struggle, which sets up what happens next. Did you hear who else was included in that genealogy? In the midst of all those fathers, there were other names. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "the wife of Uriah," AKA Bathsheba. These are not the traditional Jewish foremothers who are normally mentioned: Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. All of these women's situations are somewhat sketchy or scandalous. Most of them were Gentiles, even. These women were clearly selected very intentionally – at least one of them shoe-horned in where there's no other evidence she belongs – because Matthew was trying to make another point, without having to come right out and say it. Where the world sees scandal, God sees redemption.

And that is, of course, exactly what happens next, when Joseph is visited by an angel of God in his dream. 'Don't dismiss her quietly,' the angel commands. 'God is at work here.' All throughout this baby's heritage – throughout your heritage, Joseph – God has brought redemption out of situations that society sees as shameful. God isn't playing by the same rules. You've seen that; you know that. You are, in fact, the product of that. Trust. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife," the angel says. Do not be afraid.

And that's what shame is about, isn't it? It's about making us afraid of living into our potential as beloved creatures of God. It's about telling us we're not right, not enough, not good enough, not important enough, not popular enough. It's about making us follow rules that are more interested in promoting the powerful and keeping down the powerless. Luke gets most of the credit for being revolutionary, with his account of Mary singing about the powerful being brought down from their thrones. But here is Matthew, showing us how God raises up those mired in shame and makes them vessels of redemption and hope. "Perfect love casts out fear," we read in 1<sup>st</sup> John, but it might as well say "God's love casts out shame."

"Do not be afraid," the angel tells Joseph. God's love is transforming this scandal into a miracle. There is no shame that God can't redeem. There is no vessel too battered by the power systems of the world that God can't give purpose to. The seeds of that transformative love must have already been sown in Joseph's heart, given his choice to offer Mary an out with as much dignity as possible. But with this encouragement from the angel, those seeds took root and blossomed into a full-hearted welcome of God's work in their shared life, despite what it would look like from the outside.

This has been the way God has worked for centuries, Matthew assures us, and it's the way God is working now, to bring Jesus into the world again and again. God isn't using the worthy or the pedigreed. God is calling on all of us, no matter what shame we're carrying or who our father or mother was or wasn't. Something about

the way this holy season has been commercialized has created tremendous pressure for many of us. Decorate ever so festively. Eat ever so lavishly. Send all the cards and buy all the gifts and host all the parties and do it all cheerfully, because that's the whole point.

But that's not what Jesus says. That's not what John or Mary or Elizabeth or Joseph or the angel says. That's not the mystery we're expecting. The message of Christmas is not about a love that makes everything picture-perfect. It's about the Love that turns everything upside down, that redeems us from our shame and casts out all our fear. It's about the Love that seeks out the dirty one hidden in the corner and offers a warm drink. It's about the Love that ignores the rules of the world that try to tell us who is worthy and who isn't and proclaims instead that each person is a beloved child of God. It's about the Love that shows us that working for Peace is worth bodily sacrifice, in a world that is filled with war and violence.

In taking Mary as his wife, Joseph, the righteous man, was learning about the deeper righteousness of God, the golden thread that was woven throughout the stories of his ancestors. Indeed, their presence in that story is how we are now invited in, grafted on, welcomed into the family. Shame is a lie, the angel says. God's love is the Truth. May we all welcome this good news with courage and faithfulness, as Joseph himself did. Hallelujah and Amen!