

**LIVING THE RELATIONSHIPS CHRIST CAME TO REDEEM
(4) JOSEPH: WHY WE NEED TO LEARN EMPATHY**

Matthew 1:19-25

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(Loosely inspired by John Ortberg's book, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*, Zondervan)

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PROLOGUE

Throughout Advent, we have been reflecting on the lives of some key Christmas story characters using ideas from John Ortberg's popular book, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*. Last week we began to consider how people can develop healthy relationships with God and others. We looked at Mary, the mother of Jesus, and why acceptance is the key. This week we consider Joseph and the need to learn empathy.

SCRIPTURE

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. {20} But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. {21} She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." {22} All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: {23} "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." {24} When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, {25} but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus (Matthew 1:19-25 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes, or better, sandals. Your fiancée is pregnant. You're an honorable man; you've not had sexual relations with her. You thought she was an honorable woman. But now she's pregnant, probably several months along and starting to show. How do you feel as this news crashes into your world like a rock through a ceramic vase?

Certain expectations and promises accompanied an engagement in those days, all insured by one's background and social custom. Mary seems to have come from a good family. Her cousin, Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, was married to Zechariah the priest. One would expect Mary to be a woman of purity and devotion.

Joseph was a man of similar quality. He was from the tribe of Judah. His ancestry could be traced back directly to David, Israel's greatest king. To David it was promised:

"I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations" (Ps 89:4).

Joseph was also a kind and compassionate man. He did not want to hurt Mary. So he decided to resolve the matter quietly and without public disgrace. But an angel said to him in a dream, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Joseph believed what the angel had said and so in time Mary and Joseph were married.

We do not know how long they were married, Joseph died sometime after Jesus had turned twelve. But I think it likely it was a healthy marriage. I say this not only because Joseph had accepted Mary but also because Joseph had learned empathy, which is the ability to recognize the feelings and concerns of others, and to see things from their point of view. Empathy is a critical ingredient for any healthy relationship.

1. STOP TALKING

The first step required in order to learn empathy is to stop talking. The Bible says:

Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut (Prov 10:19 NLT).

I realize this does not apply to every person in every situation, but, in general, I would say it usually applies to people who do not think it applies to them. I have met many people over the years who have claimed or even boasted about being a good listener. But I knew from personal experience they were not, if for no other reason than the fact that they never stopped talking.

According to John Ortberg, if we stop talking then this gives us the opportunity to engage in the most important intimacy-building skill in the world: listening. He adds:

It is ironic that we try to impress people by saying clever or funny things, yet nothing binds one human being to another more than the sense that they have been deeply, carefully listened to. It is no accident that we speak of paying attention to people; attention is the most valuable currency we have.

Joseph was not one to argue or question. In fact, not a single word of Joseph is ever quoted in the whole Bible. He simply listened and then acted in accordance with what was best for the given situation. His voice was the silent voice of faith.

Some wise people in the early church, known as the Desert Fathers, recommended the practice of silence as a spiritual discipline. The reason they gave is that it is hard to talk without sinning. A man wanted to become a monk so he went to the monastery and talked to the abbot. The abbot said, "You must take a vow of silence and can only say two words every three years." The man agreed and after the first three years, the abbot came to him and asked, "What are your two words?" "Food cold!" the man replied. Three more years went by and the abbot came to him and asked "What are your two words?" "Bed hard!" Three more years went by and the abbot came to him and asked, "What are your two words?" "I quit!" said the man. "Well," the abbot replied, "I am not surprised. You have done nothing but complain ever since you got here!"

Henri Nouwen tells how when Abba Arsenius, a wealthy Roman senator who abandoned his social prominence to become a monk, prayed, "Lord, lead me into the way of salvation," he heard a voice saying, "Be silent." Listening, writes Daniel Goleman, is the single most important relational skill a person can develop. An engaging aspect of Jesus' life is that although he was the greatest teacher who ever lived, he spent an enormous amount of time simply listening to people. There is a good reason why the Lord gave us two ears and one mouth. We are supposed to spend twice as much time listening as we do talking!

2. LIGHTEN UP

The second thing we need in order to learn empathy is to lighten up.

There are some people in this world who do not like chocolate. Some tea drinkers do not care for coffee. And there are even some people who prefer not to have anchovies on their pizza. But I never met anyone who did not want more joy in their life.

The Bible tells us:

A cheerful look brings joy to the heart (Prov 15:30 NIV).

This is true socially – smiling and laughter tend to be contagious. But it is also true physiologically – smiling and laughter produce relief from stress by releasing endorphins and adrenaline that not only reduce pain but contribute to a feeling of euphoria.

Scripture does not tell us, but I have to believe Joseph had a sense of humor. How else could he have gotten his very pregnant fiancée through their ordeal? Joseph says to Mary, "Hail Mary! (I bet he loved saying that.) You know how you were asking me on the way down here if we had motel reservations? OK, OK. Well, I found us a place. And I think you're gonna love it. They offer free milk and eggs every morning! And we don't even have to walk down to the dining room. We can have breakfast right here in

our own stable, I mean, room.” (We need to lighten up.)

3. UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The third thing we need in order to learn empathy is to realize that no one we meet is a finished product. All of us are under construction. This means every relationship is also under construction.

If I realize that God is not finished with you yet, and you realize that God is not finished with me yet, then that changes our attitude toward each other. We become more patient with each other. And we appreciate whatever the other contributes rather than demand that the other person contributes to the relationship. It’s like the difference between cats and dogs. A dog says, "You love me, feed me, shelter me, care for me – you must be God." A cat says, "You love me, feed me, shelter me, care for me – I must be God."

Every construction project requires work and effort. Relationships also require work and effort. Ortberg comments:

One Christmas Eve we foolishly purchased three "easy-to- assemble" gifts. At about one in the morning, after two and a half hours of frustration and anger, I finally said to my wife, "Do you want some help with that?" Every relationship you have ever been or ever will be a part of comes with this phrase on the outside of the box: "Some assembly required." We would all like for relationships to simply flourish on their own, without any attention from us, but they don't. Every relationship is a construction zone.

4. USE YOUR SHOULDER

The fourth thing we need in order to learn empathy is to use our shoulders. Shoulders can be used to express many things. Shrugged shoulders represent resignation or apathy. Squared shoulders suggest confidence or that we share the same chiropractor. Hunched shoulders indicate despair or fear.

Shoulders can also be used to carry things. When we do it for someone else it is an expression of love. The Apostle Paul writes:

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2 NIV).

These could be physical burdens but more likely they are emotional ones. Often people get beaten down in life – beaten down by their failures, their jobs, their families, or their disappointments. They need someone to come alongside them and help shoulder whatever burden life has thrown them. We can be that “someone.” God gives us the

ability to ennoble and inspire others. Ortberg says:

You can remind fallible and finite people around you that they hold their lives and calling as a sacred trust, that their best efforts matter, that their worst failures will one day be redeemed. This is all because the Crucified One, who shouldered the burdens of the whole human race, who rose again, will come back one day to honor all that is good and set right all that has gone wrong.

CONCLUSION

Empathy is an important and necessary part of treating people the way Jesus would treat them. Charles Allen tells of a little child who went on an errand for her mother. She was late coming back, and her mother asked for an explanation. The child explained that a playmate of hers down the street had fallen and broken her doll and that she had helped her. The mother wondered what her little girl could possibly do to help mend the broken doll. The girl made a marvelous reply, "I just sat down and helped her cry."