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## “Of the Earthly Father’s Love”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year A)

December 22, 2013

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19; Matthew 1:18–25

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In Luke's Gospel, the story of God's incarnation is revealed through Mary's eyes;

in Matthew, the story is revealed through Joseph's experience.

The Word becomes flesh and makes its dwelling among us *through Mary* in Luke;

the Word becomes bone *not* of my bones, and flesh *not* of my flesh through

Joseph in Matthew.

Mary, the highly favored lady of God, is most highly favored in hymnody, too.

I was hard-pressed to find even one hymn that featured, much-less mentioned Joseph.

Mary is present for the annunciation, the manger birth,

the Gloria of the angels and shepherds,

the eighth-day consecration and birth blessing by Simeon and Anna,

for the visitation of the magi, the escape into Egypt and safe return to Galilee,

at the pilgrimage to Jerusalem where the 12 year old Jesus wanders off,

for Jesus' first miracle at Cana, at the foot of the cross,

and after the resurrection.

Joseph is present for the journey to Bethlehem, for the purpose of registration and taxation,

the manger-birth, the Gloria of the angels and shepherds,

for the eighth-day consecration and birth blessing by Simeon and Anna,

for the visitation of the magi, the escape into Egypt and safe return to Galilee,

at the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where the 12 year old Jesus wanders off...

and then no more... never to be heard of again.

At some point, after Jesus' twelfth year, his earthly father, Joseph, wanders off too,  
fades away, dies perhaps, is never an active character in his story thereafter.

So as far as we know, Joseph is present in the life of Jesus, not as his biological father,  
but as Jesus' earthly adoptive father, for at least 12 years, maybe a little more.

The child Jesus has an earthly father; the adult Jesus probably does not.

Did Mary need Joseph?

Did he serve a role in raising and nurturing of the son of God,  
or could Mary have raised him herself as a single parent of faith?

Did Jesus need Joseph, his adoptive father,

in order to "grow in wisdom, stature, and knowledge of God,"

or would he have been just fine as a single-parented child of God?

And does the Church need Joseph—the one largely MIA from our Christmas hymnody,  
the one whose adoptive earthly fatherhood is always subordinate to God's  
heavenly overshadowing?

I want to suggest that we do need Joseph, not just as a figure to balance

our idyllic manger scenes under the Christmas tree,

but as an overlooked, ordinary hero in our midst,

so close to the heart of the Incarnation that we almost miss his contributions.

While in New York City not long ago,

my husband and I attended a one-man Broadway show called *700 Sundays*.

It's Billy Crystal's sentimental tribute to his own earthly father of 15 years

who died prematurely at the age 52 from a massive heart attack

brought on by the failure of his business as a promoter of jazz musicians.

The play pays homage to this humble, middle-class, hard-working father,

an everyday hero to Crystal,

who made a point of spending some one-on-one time with the young Billy  
almost every Sunday of his short life—some 700 Sundays, Crystal surmises,

over a 15-year period: playing catch in their Long Island backyard,

taking him to see Mickey Mantle pitch for the Yankees,

swapping and refining jokes, watching Billy tap dance and develop his schtick,  
sharing meals with their crazy extended family,  
hanging out with jazz greats, like Billy Holiday,  
attending backyard barbecues and weddings together.

"Heroes don't have to be public figures," Crystal says fondly in his play.

"They can be right in your family."

And so it seems with Joseph.

The way I do the math, Jesus might surmise that he spent approximately 600 Sundays  
with his adopted father over a period of perhaps 12 years.

And I would, likewise, suggest that Joseph was Jesus' unsung hero, too,  
and the Church's unsung hero, literally—no hymns to his name—

from whom we can, nevertheless, glean valuable insight into what it means  
to live a faithful life, of long or short duration.

There are no promises that our parenthood or our ministry or our tenure  
or our coaching career will last forever,

so we do the best we can with the time we are given together  
to make our mark as uniquely gifted God-people.

So, what is the legacy of Joseph?

First of all, we, Jesus and the Church, learn that the names given to us are important.

We learn from our names; we live into our names; we exemplify the present manifestation  
of the meaning and tradition behind our names.

Joseph's name means "he will increase," or "he will add."

His family connections run deep in Israel's past, back to another Joseph,  
the 11<sup>th</sup> son of Jacob, the oldest son of Rachel, Jacob's favored wife,  
patriarch to one of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Ancestor Joseph was a dreamer, too, you will recall,

the object of sibling rivalry and jealousy who was sold by his brothers  
into slavery in Egypt.

But he was a survivor—wise and prudent—who became an administrative agent

in Pharaoh's court.

And because ancestor Joseph listened to his dreams  
and recognized that they were "of God,"

he became an agent of reconciliation in his hostile family  
and a peacemaker in strife.

Ancestor Joseph recognized that reconciliation occurs by the hand of God,  
and that despite jealousy, famine, resentment and fear,  
God intends for people and families to be reconciled and together,  
and he acted unselfishly and nobly upon that revelation.

This is the legacy which our Joseph inherits:

a legacy of dreaming, of God-awareness, of faithful obedience,  
of wise and prudent discernment and living,  
*and of tireless peacemaking in a dysfunctional family system.*

I hope we all have a little Joseph in us as we gather for the holidays  
with our extended families, which can be notoriously less than well-behaved.

I hope we all can serve as tireless peacemakers within our larger family systems.

I remember one Christmas dinner not too long ago at my own family's gathering,  
when a young guest-boyfriend showed up for our potluck dinner, potted,  
with a shotgun hidden under the folds of his coat!

Most of the family was so under the influence that they didn't even  
notice that we had toddlers crawling the carpet  
and teenagers packing heat... in the same room.

I would like to say that I tapped into my inner-Joseph and helped mitigate the danger  
in the household that evening; instead, I tapped into my inner-Moses,  
took my people, and politely exited the scene!

And I wish you could be here at the church the week after Christmas  
to see how many individuals attend the Al-Anon meetings held here.

The East Parlor is filled to overflowing with people seeking support and ways to cope  
with the issue of substance abuse in their families.

That group does an excellent job of helping people know that community help

is available so that no one needs to feel isolated because of family dynamics. Obviously, the holidays are difficult for many families, and a little Joseph-esque peacemaking and reconciliation would go a long way for all of us. This is the name-sake which our Joseph taps into, Reconciler, Peacemaker, when he makes the decision to take the pregnant Mary as his wife, despite the rumors that will swirl, in order to keep their tiny nuclear family intact. This is the legacy which our Joseph "adds to" and bequeaths to Jesus in their 600 Sundays together, thus leaving their family campsite better than the way he found it.

Secondly, we are told that Joseph is a "righteous man," and that is saying a lot because the only other man with the moniker of "righteous" in Hebrew Scripture is Noah!

To be righteous in a Hebrew context is to be law-abiding, obedient to Torah law. But here's the rub: once our Joseph discovers Mary to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit, his law-abiding righteous response, according to Deuteronomy 22:23–24, should be to expose her and her lover publicly, escort them outside the city gates promptly, and have them stoned to death! That's what being "Torah-righteous" would have demanded of Joseph. But Joseph's righteousness is tempered in this case.

He wisely considers both the Torah precedent, to be sure, yet he also considers the counsel of the angel of the Lord, given in a dream, whereby, he decides to bear the humiliation and ridicule himself of marrying a pregnant woman, rather than expose her to public shame and a painful death.

Thus he commits ecclesiastical disobedience for the sake of another in order "to save" his wife and "to save" her unborn Son, whose angel given name, Jesus, will mean "he saves."

Thus this righteous man models "grace" for his wife and son by showing sympathy and compassion for her feelings and her welfare

and her future primarily,  
considering his own reputation and well-being only as an after-thought.  
This wise and prudent man carefully weighs in the balance the consequences  
of his actions and chooses, with integrity, the welfare of the other first.  
U2 has a beautiful song called "Grace" from their album, *All That You Can't Leave Behind*,  
which was released in 2000.

The words reflect something of Joseph's compassionate response:

"Grace—she take the blame; she covers the shame; removes the stain;  
it could be her name... Grace makes beauty, out of ugly things."

That's the new righteousness that Joseph models for Mary, for Jesus, for the Church  
in his 600 Sundays.

He takes her potential blame. He covers her undeserved shame.

He removes her unmerited stain.

And he reminds us of an unselfish righteousness called "grace"

that Jesus will grow into like a well-worn shirt,  
to embrace the larger world and save people from their sins.

It is a higher righteousness that does not have to be right itself, but rather is willing  
to take the heat, the ridicule, the shame of others, and suffer quietly in their stead.

Walter Brueggemann says: "Jewish rules are broken by the Gospel,  
so the church is opened to the Gentiles..."

Everyone has to face the crisis that God's love and God's care for the world  
is large and expansive beyond our usual horizons...

Everyone has to learn that, in the power of the Gospel, while our traditions  
and our families... did the best they knew,

the rules in the family tend to be small and fearful,  
and not nearly big enough for God's love of the world."

(Walter Brueggemann. *Inscribing the Text*, p. 89-90)

One of the most poignant vignettes depicted by Billy Crystal in *700 Sundays*

involves a situation following his own father's death, when he was truly bereft and lost.  
Crystal, only 15 at the time, said he would run home from high school each day

so he wouldn't have to talk to the kids on the school bus.  
And once he got home, he would cook dinner for his mother  
because he knew that she'd be too tired to cook after work.  
His days went on like this for many months until someone suggested that Crystal  
try out for the school's basketball team.  
Sure, he said, I'll give it a try.  
So the diminutive Crystal tried out for the team after school, and watched and waited  
for the list to be posted of those who had made the cut.  
In the meantime, the coach, the wise basketball coach,  
called Crystal into his office, and said, "What's really going on with you, Billy?"  
At which point, Crystal began to cry as he explained  
how difficult the past several months had been since his father's death.  
"Here's what I'm going to do," the coach replied.  
"I'm going to put you on the basketball team, and you're going to come and practice  
with the guys every afternoon after school. And you're going to be my  
best 5'7" player."  
And the wise and prudent coach "adopted" Billy as a member of the basketball team  
and saved him from his grief.  
Not necessarily looking to recruit a 5'7" player for his team, this coach put the  
feelings and the welfare and the future of this grief-stricken teenager first,  
his own welfare and reputation second,  
and modeled for Billy, in Joseph-esque fashion I would suggest,  
what grace in action can look like.  
  
And so Joseph saves and takes Mary to be his wife.  
And he saves and accepts Jesus according to the angel's word,  
adopting Jesus as if he were his own child,  
sharing his own family tree with him for some 600 Sundays or more,  
thus forging a new God-family where faith is a stronger factor than biology  
and where the power of love is thicker than the power of blood.  
Heroes don't have to be public figures.

Sometimes they adopt us and teach us by the way they choose  
to live their lives in the short time they are with us.

Joseph was more influential in Jesus' life, perhaps, than credit given to him.

He models for Jesus that adoption can be just as powerful an influence as birth,  
and that nurture can be more salvific than nature,  
as we and the rest of humanity stand on the cusp, at the tipping point,  
of being adopted into the family of God, as children of God,  
through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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