

Westland Free Methodist Church
“Chasing Christmas: To Love or Not Love”
December 16, 2007
Matthew 1:8-25

A mother was shopping with her 5 and 3 year old when suddenly they became angry with each other. “I hate you!” and “I hate you, too!” they yelled back and forth.

“That’s not very nice,” their mother said. “I’m certainly not going to take two little boys who hate each other to McDonald’s for lunch.”

Five-year-old Jamie quickly backed down. “I don’t really hate you, Billy.”

But Billy, with the clear logic of a three year old, responded, “I still hate you! I’m not hungry.” —
Joanne H. Hunter

Ok, so we’re going to talk about love today. The contrast of love is hate of course, but hate is such a strong word, you might think of other words like disdain, or being uncomfortable around someone, or just a lack of love. These are all levels of hatred creeping into our hearts ever so subtly.

What do we see in the Christmas story between Joseph and Mary? Is it love or hate?

- It unwritten, but it’s within the “could ofs”:
- Joseph could have divorced Mary quietly.
- Joseph could have divorced Mary loudly. He could have made a spectacle of her and risen quite nicely in the church, because they were so enslaved by the law. He could have even had her stoned to death for her “sin”.
- Joseph could have blamed Mary for all the years to come for messing up what should have been a certain plan he had laid out for the family.
- Joseph could have been a doubter all the way through, making it much more difficult for Mary to live out her faith. In legal terms they call this “obstruction of justice.” Joseph could have been a husband who just made her life a living hell.

Hatred (or a lack of love) comes in some pretty obscure packages have you noticed. Hatred can even sit among us for years stewing, waiting for the right moment to lash out. It rears its ugly head in places like Iraq or Afganistan, but in all reality it’s all around us. It can happen when political lines get crossed, or when authorities get overrun, or it even visits our homes when a child vehemently opposes our discipline. Hatred is such an ugly word. We would rarely use it, but it’s there.

○ But in Joseph’s case he would accept a plan laid out by God to redeem a world filled with sin. Joseph could have reacted in hatred, but didn’t. Yet this didn’t stop hatred from showing up though. Enter, Herod. Hatred comes in many sizes, and this one’s pretty big. An iron fisted ruler. Messiah, he heard. “I won’t have it. Herod had his hands full keeping the Israelites at bay, and he seemed to be succeeding. His rule was in submission to Rome, who dominated the world at that time. Just when you think Herod did what he wanted, he too answered to a higher authority, and Rome wanted control. Any news of insurrection was a threat that would remove any leader from power. Kings had a way of disappearing in that time. So this messiah threat got to Herod’s heart quick. When he found out later that the Wisemen from the east did not return with the necessary information he needed, he took things into his own hands. Right then and there, he orders the death of any child under the age of 2 in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Overnight, it became the modern day Sarajevo. A mini holocaust for sure. Hatred reared its ugly head once again.

Why do we react so negatively when people come into our lives and try to do good? Here was Joseph and Mary trying to do good. They had went to Bethlehem to be counted in the census. They were a couple living their lives in accordance with the church’s guidance. They were obedient.

Illus. When it comes to unconditional love people mess up. Reports came out last week that children were receiving response letters from some Santa source, and instead of the cheery words of encouragement, they were letters filled with filth and immoral comments that would offend any one of us here. What is it in people that they have to mess up other people's lives to feel significant.

Illus. Contrast that with last week, when 50 plus people came for an Angel Tree dinner and received your love of gifts for the children this Christmas. The dinner included turkey and the fixins too. Some of you who received this kind of love may be in this service today. Loving each other is just that. No strings attached.

You see our obedience is the key to further encounters with God. Our temptation so often is something other than love. And that something outside of love is always a light, medium or heavy dose of hatred. Remember, that God is serious about trusting him. It's either love in your heart or not. It might seem small to you, but anything outside of love is not love.

When Joseph obeys the first time, it's not the last time God shows up. God said, "Joseph take Mary home as your wife." He obeys. But he also acts in a repetitive manner. It gets involved. He faces his family. He faces his community. He faces a judgmental OT church. And in it all he is faithful over and over again. Here's the cool thing, when you obey God, he shows up again. Let me show you.

Joseph responds in love at least 4 significant ways in the Christmas story.

1. God speaks to Joseph to take Mary as his pregnant wife. In **Matthew 1:20** it says, "**An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, and said, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.**" Can you hear the vows Joseph now has to make. "I Joseph take you pregnant Mary as my wedded wife." Hey, let's call it like we think it. Joseph certainly faced that kind of temptation. Under the white veil, was a pregnant woman. And for Joseph it was alright by him. **Verse 24** is the key to the message Joseph got from the angel in the dream. It says, "**He did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.**"

Do you hear the words from the Lord, saying to Joseph, "I love you Joseph, and I'm going to take care of you."

"You love me? You impregnate my wife to be, and you want to love me? I suppose you want me to love you for this?"

What do we do when God says he loves and instructs us to do things so contrary to what we think is right in this world. Love those who persecute you? Turn the other cheek? When some really offends you, you go to them for possibly more? What's the key in all of God's Word? It's obedience, isn't it. Here let me show you.

Illus. Newspaper columnist and minister George Crane tells of a wife who came into his office full of hatred toward her husband. "I do not only want to get rid of him, I want to get even. Before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has me." Dr. Crane suggested an ingenious plan "Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Praise him for every decent trait. Go out of your way to be as kind, considerate, and generous as possible. Spare no efforts to please him, to enjoy him. Make him believe you love him. After you've convinced him of your undying love and that you cannot live without him, then drop the bomb. Tell him that you're getting a divorce. That will really hurt him." With revenge in her eyes, she smiled and exclaimed, "Beautiful, beautiful. Will he ever be surprised!" And she did it with enthusiasm. Acting "as if." For two months she showed love, kindness, listening, giving, reinforcing, sharing. When she didn't return, Crane called. "Are you ready now to go through with the divorce?" "Divorce?" she exclaimed. "Never! I discovered I really do love him." Her actions changed her feelings.

2. Back to Joseph. God shows up again. The next time we see God speak to Joseph it's in Bethlehem. Jesus is born, they have been there for a time, up to 2 years, because when they escape to Egypt it has been between 1-2 years. We know this because when Herod goes to kill all the children under the age of two, it says he did this in accordance with the time the Magi (the wisemen) visited Jesus. But here is God again. This is what I want you to see. After the Wisemen had gone, Luke 2:13 says, "When they (the Magi) had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up he said, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." (There is this blow horn to this family., "I love you and Mary and your son")

Wow, here is God again, through his angel, speaking to Joseph. And he reassures Joseph that when they get to Egypt to not do anything until the angel speaks again. Cool. And dangerous. A new country. I have to imagine that as Joseph walked across the country line and got their passports stamped, he reflected on the patriarch Joseph who when he was sold into slavery, it took a dozen or so years to hear from God again. "Wait there until I speak to you again."

How long will it be Lord? Show me the big picture. But no. Joseph simply does what he is instructed. What kind of timing does God have you in? A long time?

3. So Joseph and Mary obey. They go. Now here's the catch. God speaks again. Now this is the 3rd time God speaks to Joseph. In Luke 2:19 it says, "After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." (I love you enough to give you direction in your life)

You see, after Herod died, he left three sons, and the kingdom was at his death divided between them. To Archelaus went Judea, Idumea, and Samaria; to Philip, Batanea and Trachonitis; to Antipas, Galilee and Perea. Now I said 3 sons, but Antipas was actually the grandson of Herod. The only reason Antipas got rule over the area of Nazareth, is that there was so much hatred between Herod and Antipater, that it is believed that Herod had him killed before his own death. Kings lived short lives in that day. Yet the yearning for power was so tempting for so many. The death of Antipater and Herod among others is why God said, "those (plural) who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

Now, if that's not a complicated life, I don't know what is. If a guy was looking for a reason to be angry with the direction his life was going, it would be Joseph.

4. Now this is where I see how God really cares about every detail. Let's read from verse 22 to the end of the chapter (1:22-23). "but when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream he withdrew to district of Galilee, and he went to a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: He will be called a Nazarene."

Are you seeing what I see. Everytime Joseph obeys God, God takes it to the next level. It takes time, and it takes patience, but there is this amazing love relationship between Joseph and God. Joseph is bent on loving God by obeying his direction without question or rebellion.

Are you like that? This is where love of God exists.

I want you to listen to a song by Sara Groves. It's entitled "When It Was Over". It's about a man a woman in marriage trouble. In fact, one of them is unfaithful to the other. It's about not giving up on each other, and reconciliation. The words will be on the screen as you listen. You see, the more I studied this theme of love in Joseph, the more I realized that this is a message about love, but also love within marriage. It was about a man and woman going through tough circumstances and making it work. Listen to this song and see if it isn't written for you right now.

Illus. - Sara Groves – When it was over

When it was over and they could talk about it
She said there's just one thing I have got to know
What in that moment when you were running so hard and fast
Made you stop and turn for home
He said I always knew you loved me even though I'd broken your heart
I always knew there'd be a place for me to make a brand new start

Oh love wash over a multitude of things
Love wash over a multitude of things
Love wash over a multitude of things
Make us whole

When it was over and they could talk about it
They were sitting on the couch
She said what on earth made you stay here
When you finally figured out what I was all about
He said I always knew you'd do the right thing
Even though it might take some time
She said, Yeah, I felt that and that's probably what saved my life

Oh love wash over a multitude of things
Love wash over a multitude of things
Love wash over a multitude of things
Make us whole

There is a love that never fails
There is a healing that always prevails
There is a hope that whispers a vow
A promise to wait while we're working it out
So come with your love and wash over us

God has this incredible desire to love in so many ways. It's going to require patience on our part, and perseverance too, but if you fight the ways of this life of having it all and having it now, you'll never get where you want to go in the first place, love. You really want a love relationship don't you. God has one for you and it might be in Bethlehem, or Egypt, or even Nazareth, and you never know if you might be a part of the next huge piece of history. But then, there isn't a one of you here today that isn't a Joseph or Mary already, you just don't know the hows and whys yet. For Joseph and Mary it was bringing the Son of God into this world. Maybe your assignment won't have as much importance tied to it like that, but God has something important for you to do. May this Christmas be one where you put Christ first in your life. Mary and Joseph did.