

Creating Space for Love  
Matthew 1:18-25  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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Today we heard a familiar story, part of the birth narrative, the story of the angel visiting Joseph. It's familiar, though not often a part of the story we spend a lot of time with. For the most part, Christianity has simply read past these verses – we know they are there, but we often only see them as a prelude to the “real” action of Jesus’ birth. When we think of the Christmas story we are more likely to think of inns that have no vacancy, mangers and stables, shepherds and wisemen, than we are to think of the announcements to either Mary or Joseph.

But today we are going to spend a little time with this story. And specifically, we are going to spend a little time with the person of Joseph.

So, let's remember again what Matthew tells us.

Matthew, the gospel writer who is recording this story for a Jewish Christian community and who makes a point frequently to remind the people of the connection between Judaism and the Jesus movement, begins by telling us that Joseph and Mary were engaged. Now we want to stop there for a moment and realize that in their culture engagement was a legal arrangement and one in which couples often did reside in the same home. While today engagements can simply be ended by removing the ring and declaring the relationship over, in Joseph and Mary's time an engagement only ended through death or divorce. While there was still a marriage ceremony to come, engagement was a full-on commitment of fidelity and partnership.

So, here are Mary and Joseph, engaged, but Matthew tells us they are not yet living together. Of course, this point becomes important because Mary is pregnant and Joseph is certain he is not the father.

This means that none of us is surprised when Joseph's instinct is to divorce her, to exit the relationship, to just move on with his life. See, that is the part that shouldn't be surprising – either in their context or in ours today. Yes, even though many of our understandings around sex and marriage have changed, still few people today would remain in relationship with someone who was having a baby with another person during their engagement. So, we understand this reaction of Joseph's.

And yet, Matthew tells us that an angel appears. And the angel assures Joseph that it is okay to go ahead with the marriage, that even though the child isn't biologically his, Mary has done nothing wrong. The angel assures Joseph that they – together – he and Mary – have been claimed to be parents of the one who will be known as Emmanuel, God with us, the one who will save the people.

So, Joseph says yes. He changes his mind. He does not do what most of us or the society around him would call reasonable and leave the relationship. Instead, he creates space for love to grow and to be nurtured.

And while this story has often been used as a prelude to Jesus' birth...while it has often been used as evidence in the conversations around Mary's virginity...today we are reminded that maybe there is something else that we should stop and notice. Maybe there is another reason we get this story. Maybe, just maybe, we need to see people creating space for love even beyond what is reasonable. And maybe we need to be those people.

Because that is what Joseph did. And the reality is that is what we need more of in our world. While it seems to become easier to build walls than bridges...while it seems to become easier to assume the worst rather than the best in other people...while it seems to become easier to circle the wagons with people who won't challenge our own thinking...while it seems to

become easier to spew hatred than to choose love and acceptance...in the midst of these realities that are part of our daily lives, we need to see some people who choose love even when it isn't easy, even when there is reason not to. We need Joseph in our world.

And so, let's not dismiss him and say that because he is a Biblical character or because he is the father of Jesus, he must be better or more special or more capable than we are. Let's not dismiss him because we are told that an angel visited him. Let's not pretend that if only an angel would come to us, then we would be better, too.

You see, it's not so much the angel or the choosing of Joseph that made him better, but that he was chosen because he was already creating space for love in his life. I suspect, even though scripture doesn't tell us stories of him before this one, that he was already a person of good character, a person of deep faithfulness. We certainly at least get that hint in verse 19 where the adjective righteous is used to describe him. While Joseph certainly felt a tug knowing that the acceptable thing to do in his situation was to walk away, while he certainly felt hurt when he found out Mary was pregnant and knew the child wasn't his, still we see Joseph's character when we read that he was "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace."<sup>1</sup> And we see Joseph's tenderness in his consideration and deep care for what happened to Mary.

What if we worked to be more like Joseph? What if we worked to be intentional about creating space in our lives for love to live and grow? What if we paused before we reacted, before we dismissed another? What if we stopped and gave people a chance? What if before we said no, we let ourselves be open to the possibilities of another person, another opportunity, of a place in our lives for hope and peace and joy and love to grow?

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1:19, NRSV.

This is what Advent is about. And today, as we celebrate Kara's commissioning, it is really what that is about as well. After all, it was when Kara created space for God's love to grow deep and to change her, that she was able to name and claim her call to ministry.

So, how will you create space for love in your life?

And what will be the results?

Will creating space for love mean that something beautiful grows in a friendship, in a family relationship, in a romantic partnership?

Will creating space for love mean that something changes in how you interact in difficult conversations in person or on social media?

Will creating space for love mean that an opportunity you hadn't previously entertained becomes available – an opportunity to discover how your gifts and the world's needs intersect?

And remember – this can be hard work...it doesn't always come easy. Remember, the angel's greeting began with the words, "Do not be afraid," because fear is a barrier to love.

So, what might happen if we set our fear aside? Just imagine what might replace it.

Friends, the possibilities are endless...if only we will create space for love.

Amen.