

The man who did what was right

Matthew 1:18-25

December 23, 2007

Joseph was a man who always did what was right ...

Wow! What a thing to have said about you, that you always do what is right. Do you know anybody like that? Maybe you are somebody like that!

I think a lot of you are. Maybe not always, but you do what is right, you care about doing what is right.

You are honest. You make a conscious and deliberate effort to tell the truth, all the time.

You follow the law, you obey the rules, whatever you are doing, unless the law or the rule in question is unjust, unless a higher law, a more fundamental rule, calls you in a different direction. But then, of course, you are still doing what is right, breaking a "rule" not to serve yourself, but to serve another, for the sake of a higher good.

You treat people with respect. You work hard and pay your debts. You are fair and generous and often kind. You do what you say you will do.

You don't cheat or cut corners to get ahead or to gain an advantage. You wait your turn. You let others go first. You do not look for ways to undermine your competition, and you do not envy others' successes.

You do what is right, because it is right, not just because it works for you. In fact, doing what is right can sometimes be a hard way to go. You may be ostracized or made fun of. You may be seen as too "straight" or too naive. You may sometimes lose out, because you won't do what everybody else is doing, because you won't do "whatever it takes" to get what you want. Being a person who does what is right requires of you courage and commitment and endurance and a finely-honed sense of responsibility.

I am thankful for people like you. The world is a better place because of people like you. Doing what is right -- righteousness, moral living -- is like a wall you build up around yourself and around your family and around your communities, keeping chaos and disaster at bay. It is a human covenant you keep with your neighbors allowing you together to rise above what would otherwise be an animalistic free-for-all, everybody grabbing what they can, however they can, doing whatever they will to survive and to thrive. Doing what is right raises you and raises us to another level of humanity, another level of human maturity, being able to stop and reflect, to reason and to choose, not just doing "whatever." That wall of righteousness protects you from evil and gives you solid ground on which to stand and a safe haven in which to live your life.

But what happens when that wall is breached? What happens when something -- something mysterious and powerful and compelling -- finds a way through the wall and finds you? What happens when something -- something mysterious and powerful and compelling -- calls you to come outside the wall?

Joseph was a man who always did what was right, but ...

But this time he didn't want to. What was right, what the law required, meant outing Mary, reporting her to the religious authorities, divorcing her publicly and letting her bear the shame and humiliation and punishment she deserved, because she, an engaged woman, had gotten herself pregnant -- by somebody else!

But Joseph did not want to disgrace her publicly. Maybe he was too kind and sensitive a guy to do that. Maybe he cared for her too much -- still -- to do that. He would break it off. He would let her go her own way (maybe to him?) because it was the right thing to do, but he would do it quietly, privately. He would spare her a public disgrace. And he would get on with the rest of his life.

That's what this man who always did what was right was thinking. But nothing could have prepared him for what happened next ...

Take her! Marry her!

That's what he was told ... in a dream. But that would be a violation of all the rules! And that would require him to sacrifice his pride, his dignity, his dreams. How could he, a man who always did what was right, do such a thing?

He was being asked, by an angel of the Lord -- by something mysterious and powerful and compelling -- to step outside the walls, to venture out into a strange and new place, to put himself in a position where he was no longer in control at all, except for the freedom to say "Yes" or "No."

If it takes courage to do what is right, to stand alone, if necessary, against the tide of public opinion, what kind of courage does it take to do this ... to act against your own better judgment and surely against your own best interest to answer the call ... of God?

Job was a good man, a man who always did what was right, but his carefully built and carefully maintained wall of righteousness came crashing down around his head! In a moment, his confidence in the justice of God was shattered. He had always lived by the rule: do what is right and God will bless you, but suddenly that rule didn't apply any more. Suddenly his world became an unpredictable and unmanageable and ungodly mess.

You see, this is what happens to men -- and women -- who do what is right. God doesn't leave them alone! God breaches the walls that protect them and God calls them to step outside.

Why? Why? To meet him!

... in the past I knew you only by report, Job said, by reputation, but now I have seen you with my own eyes!

Doing what is right is a wonderful thing. a courageous thing, a noble thing, but there is something more, something higher, something deeper, something mysterious and powerful and compelling calling you, inviting you, wanting you, wanting all of you. God is calling you. God is inviting you. God wants all of you.

Abraham was a good man, a man who always did what was right. God told him to go and he went. God made him a promise and he waited. Sure he laughed a little at the improbability of it, but he waited. And the wait was worth it. God fulfilled the promise. God gave him a son, a precious son in his old age. And then God said, *Take your son and offer him as a sacrifice to me.*

The ground shifts beneath your feet and you have no solid place on which to stand. Your heart is in your throat, but no cry comes out of your mouth because you are too stunned to speak, too shattered to cry. All you can do is say "No" and run away and trust your own wisdom, trust your own strength, to live ... or say "Yes" and trust God to provide, trust God to be good, trust the mysterious and compelling God who calls you into the wilderness.

Abraham trusted God. Abraham ventured out into the wilderness. And God was good. God did provide. And Abraham and God then knew each other in a way they never had before.

Paul was a good man, a man who always did what was right. He was a man who kept the Jewish law and a man trained to teach others to keep the Jewish law. He made it his personal mission to defend the truth, to defend the faith, to defend the law, from those who threatened to undermine it. And then, on the road to Damascus, Jesus met Jesus, face-to-face, and his life was changed forever.

This is what happens to good men and good women! ... to men and women who have already made a bold step forward, a courageous step upward. God calls them to take another step, an even bolder step, a step that is heady and risky and unnerving, a step outside the walls, a step off the end of the plank, a step into the unknown and even unknowable, a step into thin air, without a net, trusting only to the word of the Lord:

Do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit she has conceived. She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus -- because he will save his people from their sins ...

Would you do it? Would you take her? Would you marry her and raise her son?

Joseph did. He was a good man, a man who always did what was right, but he became more than that. Like Job, like Abraham, like Paul, he became a man of faith, a man who believed God, a man who knew God.

And that is what you and I are called to do and to be -- people of faith, people who believe God, people who know God. That's the meaning of Christmas: Immanuel, God-with-us. Jesus is not merely a restorer, a reformer, a teacher, come to reestablish the old law and the old ways, or give us a new law and show us a new way. He is not merely a model for us to follow, or a sign to make us take notice.

Jesus is God with us, full of truth and grace, come to save us, come to do for us and give to us what we cannot get for ourselves -- life, come to bring to us what we cannot find for ourselves -- God.

The birth of Jesus calls us to let go and to bow down, to come to the side of the manger to worship and to adore and to receive, to say and to believe: *Here is life! Here is peace! Here is God! Here is God's love made real ... for me!*

Oh, how I do hope and pray that my grandson, Jack, will grow to be a man who always does what is right. But there is something else I want so much more for him! I want him to meet Jesus. I want him to know Jesus. I want him to know he is loved by Jesus. I want him to be aware, acutely aware, palpably aware, joyfully aware, of the presence of God with us -- God with him -- at every time and in every circumstance of his life.

And I want the same for each of you ...