

A Choice to Accept or Reject

12-13-2020

Matthew 1:18-25

Think for a moment with me about the predicament the first couple of Christmas found themselves in. Mary and Joseph were engaged and Mary becomes pregnant, but she and Joseph have not had sex. We don't know if she tells Joseph or if her father informs him but the scripture indicates that when he hears about her being with child, there is tension, conflict; and a choice would have to be made on his part about their relationship. Just think of the shock he must have felt. She had been unfaithful to him. Joseph felt betrayed and rejected. Mary had broken the trust placed in her even before they were married. How could he marry such a person?

In their culture, engagement held more significance than it does in ours. In their day being engaged meant that vows were given to each other, dowries exchanged by parents and preparations made for the wedding. To break an engagement was to go through a legal divorce procedure. Joseph had a choice to make to accept or reject Mary or to have her charged with adultery and even have her stoned. Joseph is a righteous man, an example for us to follow, his choice is to divorce her quietly.

This meant he would reject her, remove her presence from his life. This he thought was the right thing to do. It probably was the only thing he knew to do. He and his family and friends would ostracize her, have nothing to do with her. There are many in our society at Christmas that feel abandoned today. Some are spurned because they are advanced in years, quarantined, can't get out or around, just left alone, excluded. Some are young and shy and feel misunderstood, self conscious. Some are of a different race, or divorced, widowed, single, poor, handicapped,

homeless, hungry, in need of Christmas gifts for the kids. Most of us are righteous people but we unconsciously snub them or don't even see them.

Then came the night of that strange and wonderful dream in which God told him, "Don't reject Mary. Go to her. Listen to her, hear her out and get the whole story, accept her." The angel said, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary home as your wife." And what did he do? And after, he followed the angel's advice. He went to Mary. He didn't wait for her to come to him and beg and plead. We don't know what he said, but we can imagine that there were tears in his eyes. We all know how hard it is to say, "I'm sorry. I have been wrong about you."

This is the message for us this Christmas. Stop rejecting and start accepting by listening to one another. This is the gift God is giving us this year, Himself. He wants to free us from fault finding and suspicion of others. He wants us to start taking risks and sharing of ourselves with others. In the Christmas story we find this contrast and struggle between the rejecters and the caregivers, those showing kindness and compassion and those ignoring and rejecting.

Herod was a rejecter. The innkeeper was a rejecter. But the wise men and the shepherds are sharers. The shepherds are the poor people, nobodies, but God does not exclude them, they get the full celebration; an angelic announcement, light, heavenly hosts singing. In that instant, the poor, nameless persons are accepted and placed on center stage, in an encounter with God.

How do we get past this tendency of ignoring and dismissing people? Like Joseph we must be willing to learn that the problem is not out there somewhere with the other person. It is in here, within ourselves. Hear and follow the instruction of the angel, "Do not fear," accept, trust, risk, care, share. This is what we must do to break through to those who feel

abandoned. The gospel news is, God does not exclude them and neither do we.

I read a beautiful story about someone who was rejected, at least felt rejected and about her husband who refused to let her be ostracized. Shortly after his marriage Thomas Moore was called out of town on business. He was gone for several months. When he returned home he found waiting for him at his front door, not his beautiful wife but the doctor. "Your wife is upstairs but she has asked that you not go up." That's when Thomas learned the terrible truth that his wife had contracted smallpox, the disease that had left her once flawless skin, pocked and scarred. She had taken one look in the mirror and had commanded that the shutters be closed and that her husband never see her again.

But Thomas would not listen. He ran upstairs and threw open the bedroom door. It was a black as night inside and not a sound was heard. Groping along the wall, he felt for the gaslight but heard a startled cry, "No, don't light the lamp." He hesitated, but before he could say or do anything heard his wife say, "Please go! This is the greatest gift I can give you now, divorce me."

Thomas did go. He went down stairs to his study where he sat up all night pondering. Then after praying he wrote, although he had never written a song before, he did and also the music to go with it expressing his feelings. The next morning he returned to his wife's room. He felt his way in that dark room to a chair and sat down. "Are you awake?"

"I am," she said, "but you must not ask to see me, just remember me as I was."

Thomas replied, "Then I will sing to you." These are the words to the song he sang,

“Believe me, if all those endearing young charms, which I gaze on so fondly today, were to change by tomorrow and flee from my arms, like fairy gifts, fading away, thou would be adored, as this moment thou art, let thy loveliness fade as it will...”

He heard a movement from the dark corner where his wife lay in loneliness. He continued, “Let thy loveliness fade as it will, and ‘round the dear ruin each wish of my heart would entwine itself verdantly still.”

The song ended and his voice tailed off on the last note. Then he heard his bride rise. She crossed the room to the window, reached up and slowly drew open the shutters. They embraced wept and reconciled.

So this is the miracle of Christmas, we are not rejected by God. God has not avoided us but has come to save us. We can sense the presence of God with us. This Advent we can become more open to each other, more thoughtful, more considerate, more generous. There is a power of love and tenderness that touches all of us.