

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC **December 22, 2019**
Advent 4th Sunday of Year A **Matthew 1:18-24**

A baby changes everything! Certainly many of you know this much better than I. When that first child is born, real changes occur: the parents don't see their friends as often as they once did; their conversations now revolve around the baby's most recent achievements; daily routines are disrupted and, of course, a baby's regular feeding and sleep schedule can cause a great deal of stress. If a second or third child should arrive in short order, the time and attention devoted to this young family is not simply doubled or tripled, but increases exponentially. So, a baby's arrival, as desirable as it may be, does change everything, and it may not be the unmitigated "bundle of joy" those parents were expecting. Adjustments have to be made.

Jesus is, of course, the baby who changes everything. He is the One who brings the promise of salvation to a waiting world. Today's reading from the gospel of St. Matthew sets the stage for the drama that will unfold during His adult life. It foreshadows themes of conflict and misunderstanding that will be played out on a much larger scale throughout His public ministry. The dilemma with which Joseph has to wrestle, when he discovers that his wife is with child and he is not the father, will be duplicated years later. Many will become suspicious of Jesus when He presents Himself as One who claims to speak in God's name, but in a manner that often seems to be at odds with so many of the customs of their religious tradition. How is Joseph going to respond to what appears to be Mary's scandalous condition; how will the crowds respond to Jesus, a supposed teacher of wisdom, who associates with prostitutes, with sinners and tax collectors? In the cross-fire of shame and accusation in both situations, the Gospel shows a path to resolve the apparent quandary.

The character of Joseph provides a first clue. Joseph is depicted in the gospels as a carpenter. His very trade bespeaks a certain sense of integrity; it is difficult for a carpenter to fake his work. If the product the carpenter produces is of inferior quality, it will be readily apparent. If the legs of the table don't balance or the chair can't hold the weight of a person's body, no fast-talking is going to fool the potential buyer. Likewise, a person of integrity is one of whom it can be said that all the pieces of their life fit together. They are what they say they are; there is a consistency that is evident in all their actions; there is an honesty that pervades their speech. It is this quality of integrity that Joseph employs in resolving the dilemma of Mary's unexpected pregnancy.

Joseph is trying to do the right thing amid very confusing circumstances.

According to the thinking of the times he should divorce Mary, or even shame her publicly because her presumed misbehavior had brought disgrace upon him and upon his family. That is what a strictly legalistic solution should lead him to do. But Joseph decides not to claim the right of an aggrieved husband. He decides to end the marriage in as quiet a way as possible. By deciding to divorce Mary Joseph is acting in a manner that his contemporaries would consider "righteous." He is applying the law as the rabbis would tell him he should, but he wishes to do it in a way that would spare Mary any public humiliation. He tempers his application of the law. He shows mercy, concern and compassion to Mary in her predicament. He has respect for the law, but more important is his love and respect for Mary as a person.

This foreshadows the tension that will run throughout the ministry of Jesus, the tension between law and mercy. Interestingly this is the same tension we see in the church today with Pope Francis's somewhat ambiguous statements about the possibility of divorced and remarried Catholics receiving the Eucharist, and some who would want to see the rules enforced that would prohibit such a practice. Jesus said, "I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it," and He goes on to say that the law is fulfilled by love of God and love of neighbor. The way in which Jesus in His words and actions refracted the law of Moses through the lens of mercy would invite recrimination and accusation. His behavior was entirely too much for many of His fellow Jews. It is not surprising that the One who caused scandal in the womb should later cause scandal in His ministry. What He has given us is the example of how love should frame every particular ethical norm, how the norm is interpreted and applied. The paradox is that to fulfill the law, one has to go beyond it.

After Joseph has come to his decision, he decides to sleep on it—a wise move. And here he is introduced to a new plan, God's plan. What his contemporaries would label as scandal, Joseph is told is the Holy Spirit at work, and Joseph has a role to play in the working out of that plan. He is to welcome Mary into his home and to name the child, "Jesus," for "He will save His people from their sins." Joseph's compassionate action with regard to Mary is seen now as a creative attempt to bring love into a world of law, to extend mercy to what looked like sin. St. Matthew in the opening chapter of his gospel is letting us in on God's secret, hidden plan to be revealed most clearly in Jesus—of the Spirit of God at work in the ministry of Jesus.

As we enter this final week of Advent, let us consider how we can allow mercy to enter into our lives; how we might refrain from demanding what we think is owed to us, what we believe we are entitled to, and simply give someone a break; to let them off the hook to start over again. That is what today's Gospel passage comes down to; it is what the whole Gospel message boils down to--to treat another in the same way

as we would want to be treated. This is the heart of the Christmas story. As we prepare to celebrate it, let us pray that we can also prepare to live it.