

Things Jesus Taught Us (8)*

By

Philip Gulley

Scripture: Matthew 1:1-16

We had family Thanksgiving at our house this past Thursday, then on Friday went to Paoli for the Apple Family Thanksgiving, which we eat at a restaurant, Joan's mother, Ruby, being too old to cook, but still too much of a mother to let her daughter's cook, so we go to a restaurant and it works out pretty well. **The restaurants of Orange County, Indiana do not serve good food, but they do give you a lot of it, adhering to what I call the Golden Corral theory of dining—that people don't mind if the food is bad, so long as there is a lot of it.**

So we ate bad food, then returned to Ruby's house, stopping on the way there to scout out the graveyard where Joan's ancestors are buried. **We do this whenever we go see Ruby.** We'll take her for a drive and she'll want to go the long way home, past the Apple Chapel church and graveyard, to visit the ancestors. "Can we please go home past the church," she'll say. **When Ruby was physically able, we'd pull the car over alongside the road and she would lead us on a forced march through the cemetery, pointing out the tombstones, telling us stories about the people underneath them.**

They represented a pretty fair sample of humanity—mostly normal people with a few luminaries sprinkled in, an adulterer or two, and to the family's deep disgrace—a man who went to prison for cattle rustling. When Ruby sensed I was going to ask for her daughter's hand in marriage, she took me to the graveyard so I could meet the relatives and know what I was getting myself into, because you really don't know a person until you've met their ancestors. **My father told me, when I reached marrying age, "Son, don't ever forget, you don't just marry a woman. You marry her family."**

One of the analogies the Bible employed was that of Jesus as the groom and the Church as the bride, the first thing Matthew did was walk the Church, the bride, through the bridegroom's family graveyard so they could meet the family. **We call this chapter "the begats" because in the King James Version it said A begat B and B begat C and C begat D, right up to when Joseph begat Jesus.** The women played an instrumental role in the begatting, but were seldom mentioned. That's the way it was back then; the way it still is in some cultures. **But when we came to the begats, the names were hard to pronounce, our brains clouded over, and we didn't appreciate their significance, so we skipped right over the begatting and made our way into the story.** But anyone who's ever begatted knows begatting is important, and even fun, so I want to linger there a bit today.

* A pastoral alert: The theme of this message was inspired by Fred Craddock's sermon "God Is With Us" from his book, Cherry Log Sermons. The insight concerning Joseph's kindness to Mary is his, not mine, as is the graveyard imagery. The best thing any preacher could do for herself and her congregation is to read Fred Craddock.

When you go home today and someone asks, “What did the minister talk about this morning?”, you can tell them we talked about begatting and maybe we’ll have a bigger crowd next Sunday.

Back in the far corner of Jesus’ family graveyard, where the tombstones are crumbly and leaning, is Abraham. I don’t know what to make of him. **He was willing to sacrifice his little boy, Isaac, to prove his devotion to God.** I would like to have been around when he tried explaining that to his wife. That would have been interesting. **I bet she never let them go to the woods alone after that.** “What do you mean, you tied him to a burn pile?” I wonder how Abraham got out of that one. **There were also a few women in this graveyard, each of them important in their own way.** Ruth, a model of commitment. Rahab, a prostitute, who did the right thing when it counted. **The next time you’re driving down Washington Street and see a hooker and think poorly of her, you might remember Jesus had a prostitute in his family graveyard.** And there’s Bathsheba, whose husband Uriah was killed by King David. Now there was an interesting man. David. I bet he had a big tombstone. **Shepherd, musician, writer, poet, soldier, king.** A conflicted man, he had the capacity for amazing tenderness, took in and cared for the poor widow of his worst enemy, then killed a man so he could sleep with his wife. **He was in the family graveyard too.** What a family that was. I’m glad Matthew walked us through it.

Right at the edge of the graveyard, in the new part where the gravestones are still straight and legible, is Joseph. Son of Jacob. Husband of Mary. Father of Jesus. **Oh, I know the Church says God was the father of Jesus, but Joseph was the one who raised him.**

Joseph was engaged to Mary when engagement was a legal matter. Children were betrothed in their early years, then married when they came of age. Money was exchanged. Dowries paid. Papers signed. Families involved. Legacies at stake. **And so Joseph and Mary had been promised to one another, but before they could marry, it becomes evident Mary is pregnant and questions have been raised about the father.** Now what is Joseph to do? He received no shortage of advice. We know how these things work—advice-givers come out of the woodwork when they see you’ve got a problem. Boy, the line up. **People who’ve made a wreck of their lives but won’t hesitate to tell us how to live ours.**

“I know what I’d do if she were my fiancé,” some of his friends told him. “I’d be done with her.” But that wasn’t Joseph’s way. **He had others friends, people he knew from the synagogue, who told him to do what the Bible said.** “Just do what the Book says. You can’t go wrong if you follow the Book.”

You know those kind of people, don’t you? Folks who believe every problem can be solved with a Scripture verse. **Folks who carry around a twenty pound Bible and beat people with it.** Well, what did their Bible say about women caught in adultery? Let’s look at the Book. **Deuteronomy 22:21 “They shall bring the young woman to the door of her father’s house, and the men of the city shall stone her to death with stones.”**

Joseph loved the Scriptures as much as the next man, but he wasn’t about to go down that road. I think Joseph might have been the first person to really know how to read the Bible. **He figured**

out that you had to read and interpret the Bible with God's love in mind. That was pretty good. We've had the Bible thousands of years and some people still haven't figured that out yet. **But Joseph did.** He said, "I'll not shame her. I'll not belittle her. I'll not abuse her. I'll not ridicule her. I'll care for her. I'll protect her. I'll marry her." What a good person Joseph was. **I tell you, friends, if in reading the Bible, you find excuses for humiliating, hurting, or hating someone else, especially when it makes you feel better about yourself, you're reading it wrong.** Joseph knew that, and we know it too, don't we?

It's not Christmas yet. **The baby isn't here yet, but I'm thinking of Joseph and feeling pretty good about things.** Mary's starting to show, people are talking about her behind her back, but Joseph is right there with her, going to raise the child as his own. **He and Mary will take that boy and teach him what he needs to know, take him to the synagogue, teach him to honor his fellow man, teach him to respect women, tell the truth, love the underdog, help the outcast, help him grow up and be a good person.** I'm feeling good about Christmas, because Jesus is coming into the world, and he's got a loving mother and a good father who'll do right by him.

In a world where folks don't always do the right thing, Mary and Joseph will. **And so Christmas will come.** It's not here yet, but it's on its way. But remember this, friends, Christmas comes whenever and wherever someone stands up and says, "I'm going to do the right thing."

And what is right is to be kind and good and decent when we could have been forgiven for being otherwise.