

**Rev. Mike Cole**  
**Providence Presbyterian Church**  
**Fourth Sunday in Advent**  
**December 21, 2025**  
**Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Matthew 1:18-25**

**"Righteous Love"**

There is a story told by Calvin Miller about a first-grader in a rather counter-culture community who arrived a few days late for the beginning of school. His teacher was pleased that his parents had filled out all the appropriate forms, including putting his name on a tag around his neck. Even though the teacher was accustomed to names like "Sea-Foam," "Precious Promise," and "Peek-a-Boo," she was startled by the name on this small boy's tag, "Fruitstand."

However, she went with the flow and throughout the day repeatedly used his name: "Fruitstand, would you like to color a picture?" "Fruitstand, it's time for recess." When it was time to put the children on the buses that afternoon, she said, "Now don't you worry, Fruitstand, the bus driver will know where to drop you off because I'm sure your parents wrote where to drop you off on the back of your name tag." Turning over Fruitstand's name tag, she found the word, "Anthony."

When our assumptions are challenged, it can change our whole outlook. Just ask Joseph about how God can change your life in the blink of an eye. He had his life all arranged - he was engaged to be married; he had a good job; he was respected in the community. Everything was going according to plan until he discovered that Mary was pregnant. His neatly arranged world began to crumble around him. What would the neighbors say? How could he tolerate their snide remarks? His reputation would suffer terribly. Mary may have been "blessed among women," but Joseph was embarrassed among men.

When most of us hear "annunciation," we think of the announcement to Mary, not to Joseph. We may think of a painting depicting an angel whispering to Luke's serenely beautiful Virgin. However, few painters tried their hand at Matthew's depiction of the annunciation: Joseph bolting upright in bed, awaking in a cold sweat after the nightmare of being told that his fiancée is pregnant, and not by him, and that he should go ahead and marry her anyway.

With all due respect to Mary, poor Joseph kind of gets lost in the shuffle. We hear a lot about the Madonna but nothing about the “Majoenna!” Ok, maybe that’s going a little too far, but you get the point.

Joseph was a father and a step-father all at the same time. Matthew tells us that Joseph was "a righteous man." As a righteous man, he would be expected to be offended. Righteous men in that era saw things as black or white, right or wrong, just or unjust. Therefore he was caught between the rock of loving the law and the hard place of loving Mary. What was he supposed to do?

Even as God intervened with Mary, God intervened with Joseph. God appeared to Joseph in a dream leading him to make the scandalous decision to marry Mary. The vision tells Joseph that this child is a part of God's plan to salvage the world. By believing that Mary's child was divinely given, Joseph set out on a lonely, uncharted path of marrying a pregnant fiancée and naming (and thus claiming) her child as his own, assuming responsibility for the child who, when called, answered not to the name of Joe Jr., but Emmanuel (God with us).

Have any of us ever taken a road that we thought was right, we hoped was right, but with no signs to tell us for sure? We wouldn't spend so much of our lives in a quandary, in restless, tortured uncertainty if God's will for us were merely to walk the same path as our parents, or if God would speak to us through crystal-clear messages in neon lights across the evening sky, rather than dreams that could be from God or just as easily from an evening of Mexican food.

Oh Joseph, silently stumbling beside Mary to Bethlehem, you remind us of ourselves and our stumblings, which we hope will be called faithfulness. We hope. For Joseph, God's plan of salvation re-defined his righteousness. Righteousness came to mean doing what is right even if the world says it’s wrong.

It was at Joseph’s knee that Jesus learned not only carpentry but also that kind of righteousness. To be righteous is to do what God wants, quietly, obediently, whether we understand or not, no matter the embarrassment or consequences. The old righteousness was defined as staying out of jail. Jesus spoke of new righteousness as the willingness to visit the prisoner. Old Righteousness had been defined as non-defilement, keeping clear of sinners and outcasts. Instead, Jesus sat at table with sinners and welcomed harlots and tax collectors to his parties.

Here is a new way of serving God, a way I believe Jesus learned from, among other things, observing Joseph. We usually confuse self-righteousness with righteousness. Thus, we tend to think of a righteous person being one who has impeccable behavior exemplified

in a sort of “stiff-necked goodness” - an attitude of, “I don’t care about people only in being right.”

But in Joseph, Jesus sees a righteous man who is willing to bear the presumed guilt of another and silently suffer ridicule. Undoubtedly, Jesus had heard stories about his birth as he was growing up. He must have known the righteous role his adoptive father played in his early life. Jesus saw righteous love in action.

There is a stunning Latin prayer to St. Joseph entitled, “O Felicem Virum” which means, “O happy man.” The prayer begins, “O happy man, blessed Joseph, to whom God was given - whom many kings desired to see and did not see, to hear and did not hear - not only to see and hear, but to carry, to kiss, to clothe, and to care for.”

All the things hidden from the wise and powerful were revealed to a nobody living in a nowhere village, a mere blemish on the face of the world. Joseph is us - for as pumped up with our own importance as we sometimes are, we know that we are nobodies living in a nowhere village.

And yet, what the wise and powerful seek is revealed to us - the last, the least, the lost and the little in the ultimate littleness of God’s Holy Child, Jesus himself. Joseph’s love was a righteous love - not self-righteous nor self-serving - but a love which was willing to identify with the outcast and innocent. Joseph was a father who begat Jesus’ brothers and sisters but not Jesus. In Joseph, Jesus had an ideal role model for righteous love - love which empties itself for another. Thus, when it came time for Jesus to empty himself for the world, he knew just how to go about it.

Yes, in the gospel narratives, Mary gets lots of play and Joseph barely gets mentioned. But when it really counted; when being noticed by the one who would transform the world, Joseph mirrored a powerful love that would guide Jesus all his life. We discover within Joseph the very pattern of righteous love which Jesus would draw upon as he faced his own death.

Perhaps it wasn’t just God to whom he was speaking when he cried from the cross, “Father into thy hands I commit my spirit.” The hands which had nurtured him, steadied him, guided him, and supported him were open to receive him once again. Joseph ranks above prophets, priests and kings precisely because, in emptying himself for another, he carried, kissed, clothed and cared for the one who emptied himself for our sake.

Together, Joseph and Jesus set a pattern that we are to follow, exhibiting righteous love - love which empties itself for another. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus we dare not forget his death and the reason for it. He died – he emptied himself so that our lives can be full.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen**