

Matt. 1:18-25 The Best Thing That ever Happened

One of the most difficult things to do in life is to “put your feet into someone else’s shoes” and “walk a mile of their journey.” The idea of living someone else’s life for awhile is so close to the meaning of “compassion” that some have given it as its definition. Compassion is the empathy and understanding that comes from walking a mile in someone’s shoes. Literally, it means to “suffer with” another, evoking a desire to help alleviate their pain. It is, especially for Christians, one of the highest virtues.

Most find it easier to be compassionate towards people who have had similar experiences. Support groups can provide psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing, and often involve people who have had a common experience.

Those who have suffered the loss of a child, spouse, or parent

Those recovering from addiction

The families of addicts

Those who have been divorced . . .

One easily gets the idea. Compassion is easier and more therapeutic among people with similar life experiences.

Mary and Joseph

With this thought in mind we consider the lives of Mary and Joseph, who are better understood compassionately than otherwise. That is, it is helpful to at least try to walk a bit in their shoes rather than see them only through the theological lens of Christian tradition.

It is hard to understand their lives for a variety of reasons. They lived a long time ago and in a faraway place with what to us are exotic customs and a strange language. They did not benefit from 2,000 years of theological reflection about their experience and what the meaning of it might have been.

Their circumstance was simply this: They were engaged when Mary turned up pregnant, and Joseph could not be the father. This situation could not have been easy for them or for their families. One might easily understand if people didn’t want to believe her if she told a story that involved a miraculous conception. We wouldn’t believe it if a girl of our acquaintance became pregnant and came up with such a story. One can see why Joseph considered a divorce and refusing to accept her child as his own. But sometimes miracles happen in such situations.

An Acquaintance of Mine

I was once acquainted with a man whose wife's daughter became pregnant when she was 16 years old. From time to time he would talk to me about it. It was a trying time for him and his family. They were already a blended a little like the Brady Bunch with children from previous marriages thrown together as if they were related. He confided in me that the girl was dark. She stayed in her room all the time and never smiled. She refused to come to dinner and never helped around the house. Engaging in conversation with her was impossible. Though intelligent, she did poorly in school. She would sneak out of the house late at night. They feared drugs and alcohol.

Then she became pregnant. In a short time everything changed. I guess you could say that she was awakened by the pregnancy. She changed the way she presented herself, becoming more outgoing and talkative. She became more responsible, started helping out with the chores and raising her grades. She smiled a lot. She turned into a human being after all. Then the child was born.

Every child born is a miracle of God. It is a disgrace that there was ever a thing called "illegitimacy," and hopefully we will do away with such notions. As this child grew he didn't know the difference between biological relatives and relatives by marriage. He was a

delight and brought joy to the whole family. They were all devoted to his care.

My friend said the his birth was, "the best thing that ever happened to them." He said that the child made them become a family, gave their daughter back to them. He said he would have no problem believing the whole thing was God's will, a gift from God.

Joseph

Is it too much of a stretch to believe that something like that is what happened to Mary and Joseph and if we think only in terms of the miraculous nature of her conception we may miss the other miracle? It is common to believe that God only works in conventional ways when often the best things that happen are the unconventional things. Even though the birth of Jesus undoubtedly caused some strife between them and among their family and friends, they were able to see the great gift in it all and that is mostly what Joseph's dream was about.

Mary became pregnant without him and the only logical conclusion he could draw is that she had been unfaithful. He had thought of divorcing her and moving on and one would have understood if he was a little torn inside. He had the choice in the matter. In the dream he was told that he should accept Mary and the child because it was all God's doing. And that is what

he did. Whatever immediate joy they experienced after Joseph legitimized the child and named him Jesus is pale by comparison to the joy Jesus brought to the world through his life and death and resurrection. Though we are led to believe that Joseph was not around at the end of Jesus' life, Mary was, and among the things it would not be hard to believe her saying is that the birth of Jesus was the best thing that ever happened to her.

The Best Thing That Ever Happened

The world needs to have a “best thing that ever happened” moment; something that unites us, and not a war, but it is okay if it turns out to be unconventional. Something that is life to us and not death.

With all that is happening:

The international scene - Iraq, Syria, Russia, China, and the Sudan

The domestic scene - race relations and an economic recovery that seems to be working for some and not for others, the tension surrounding the election

And in our personal lives — each impacted by health concerns, relationship concerns, money concerns

We are inundated with bad news and it is causing our temperatures to rise as well as our anxiety levels. Maybe we are over-reacting, but such are the times.

The example of Joseph means that we should go ahead and live out the awkward unconventional circumstances of our lives. They may turn out to be miraculous, orchestrated by God himself to bring about crazy redemptions and turn us all into human beings at last. Even if with our theology we struggle to believe it is ever God's will for a young girl to become pregnant out-of-wedlock, we can at least agree that God can redeem those situations and countless others like them. So let us be slow to judge; let us forego judgment altogether in the expectation of a Christmas miracle like the one that happened when Christ himself was born.

Every person is precious and worthy of compassion and love, even when they misbehave, especially when they misbehave. In our hearts the miracle happens when we catch a glimpse of what it must be like to walk a mile in the shoes of the people from whom we differ the most, and learn to love and accept them as they are, even as we have been loved and accepted as we are. That is compassion and it is the great Christmas miracle; and it is the best thing that ever happened to us all!

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