

Matthew 1:18-25
Fear of a Ruined Reputation

Prayer for Illumination: Make us to know your ways, O LORD; teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation; for you we wait all day long. Amen.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s classic story, *The Scarlett Letter*¹, the opening chapter sees the narrator rummaging through old documents in the run-down Custom House of Salem Massachusetts – the place where taxes were paid on imports in this seaside town. **He finds a piece of red cloth, worn and faded.** He can tell there used to be gold embroidery on it, but none of the glitter was left anymore. As he holds up this tattered piece of cloth, he sees that it is a capital letter “A”, exactly three and a quarter inches long. The narrator finds the roll of paper that had been twisted around the letter, which explains what it was and where it came from. This scarlet letter “A” had belonged to a Hester Prynne many years ago.

The narrator goes on to spin a tale of this Hester Prynne, who was forced by her town to wear this scarlet letter “A” as a sign of her shameful act of adultery. But when Prynne was sentenced by the town judges to wear this scarlet letter, the other women in town are not impressed.

The sentence was too light! Too gracious!

One woman, fifty years old, pipes up as a crowd gathers around the marketplace, “Ladies! It’d be much better for this town if church-going women like us were allowed to deal with this adulteress, Hester. Don’t you think, ladies? If the five of us got to pass judgment on her, would she have gotten off as lightly as she has before the magistrates? I don’t think so.”

Another goes on, “The magistrates may be God-fearing, but they are too merciful—and that’s the truth! At the very least, they should have branded Hester Prynne’s forehead with a hot iron.”

“Branded?” scoffs another, “This woman has brought shame to all us, she ought to die. Isn’t there a law that says so? There truly is, in both the Bible and our town laws. The magistrates will only have themselves to thank when, having disregarded these laws, they find that their wives and daughters are sleeping around!”

Hawthorne was writing this work of fiction in the late nineteenth century, and he was telling a story about seventeenth century Boston. But the setting of his story has a lot in common with the world of Mary and Joseph. **Theirs was a world and a culture where reputations were built around shame and honor.** And like Hester Prynne, showing up to the town square pregnant and with no husband in sight would have been an occasion for immense shame and public disgrace – a ruined reputation, to be sure.

Her fate would have been similar to Hester’s – cut off from her community, whispers behind her back, and left to raise her child on her own. And that’s even a generous situation.

The old law of Deuteronomy commanded that “if an engaged woman [like Mary] who lived in a town (where neighbors would have heard her cry for help if she had intended to ward off the man) became pregnant, both the man and the woman were to be stoned to death.”²

¹ Quotes and details are adapted from the “No Fear” version of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlett Letter*.
<https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/lit/the-scarlet-letter/>

² Donald Senior, *Abingdon NT Commentary on Matthew*, 1:18.

By the time of Mary and Joseph this law was hardly ever literally applied, people who had adulterous relationships were hardly ever stoned anymore, but that does not mean everything was a-okay. The shame and the humiliation undoubtedly persisted.

Mary's reputation would be ruined, no doubt about it.

But Mary is not the focus of this passage; **Joseph is**. This carpenter from Nazareth – a descendent of the great King David.

And Matthew wants his readers to know **that Joseph is a righteous Jewish man**. He is a just man.

For Matthew's Jewish readers righteousness has to do with following God's laws from the Torah – the kind of laws that brought judgment on women found to be pregnant outside of marriage.

Mary had apparently tried to explain her situation to Joseph, but we can understand why he might be less than open to hearing about this Holy Spirit conception. It was about as believable then as it would be now – which is to say, it probably sounded like a desperate excuse by someone caught in a shameful situation. There was that prophecy from centuries ago – the old “virgin giving birth” – but how many times had that been used as an excuse before?

As a righteous Jewish man, Joseph is in a difficult situation. He is expected to do “the right thing” that is revealed in God's law – which even if that wouldn't mean Mary's death it would surely mean something severe and humiliating for her - but he senses that the **compassionate thing to do does not follow the letter of the law**.

As Matthew's first Jewish readers hear Matthew telling this story they see their own situation. For them, Matthew's retelling is really less about the whole virgin birth, and it is more about **Matthew painting a picture of discipleship**.

As first century Jewish disciples of Christ, these first hearers of Matthew see their own situation in Joseph in the tension between his righteousness and his compassion for Mary.

One commentator puts it this way, “As Jewish Christians who had always revered the law, they sometimes found themselves torn between strict adherence to the letter of the Torah and the supreme demand of love which their new faith [in Jesus] called them. If they neglected the Law, they were accused by others, and perhaps by themselves, of rejecting Bible and tradition as the ‘unrighteous.’”³

Like Joseph, they experienced that **their own reputations as righteous and upright Torah followers was put in jeopardy by the demands of love and compassion**.

They could anticipate a crowd like the one that shows up in *The Scarlett Letter* showing up at Joseph's door:

“It'd be much better if Torah-following people like us got to decide on punishments!”

“That Joseph is too merciful!”

“This woman has brought shame on us all, she ought to die! Isn't there a law in the Torah that says so?”

Like Joseph, Matthew's first readers felt this pull between the Law that they followed and the compassionate response that come from Jesus' own command of love. Their reputations as righteous people were at stake. A compassionate response could mean a ruined reputation.

I think we can look at this righteous Jewish man, Joseph, and see something of ourselves in his situation, too. **There are times when we feel tension between righteousness and the demand of love or a pull toward compassion**.

³ Eugene Boring, *New Interpreters Bible Commentary on Matthew*, electronic version.

I remember once in University, when my husband Daniel and I were dating, we drove to Chicago one day to hear the symphony. On the way home it was dark and getting pretty late, and the roads were mostly empty. We were just about back to Grand Rapids when a black SUV went flying by to pass us, then out of nowhere started swerving, lost control, and rolled over completely before coming to a crushing stop in the ditch. Daniel slowed down and pulled over to the side of the road and I got out my flip phone to call 911.

No sooner had we pulled over than the driver of the SUV jumped out of her car unharmed and ran across the highway to our car. “Don’t call the police, please, please, please don’t call the police.” We could smell the alcohol on her breath. “Don’t call the police,” she pleaded with us, “I’m going to school to be a teacher and if this ends up on my record, I will never be able to get a teaching job. Please just let me call my friend instead to come and get me.”

I froze with my phone in hand as we tried to calm her down and talk to her. She was completely panicked, and I was frozen. Someone coming from the opposite direction saw all this happen and had immediately called 911, so the police and ambulance did eventually show up and she did end up going to court.

But I remember that feeling of being frozen between what I knew was right and her crying, begging us to not turn her in.

That was a pretty short and intense experience, and it was over before I could really reflect on what was happening. But you may be able to relate to Joseph’s experience in a more protracted kind of way, especially when it comes to how we experience very hot button topics that the church has historically held to very black-and-white kind of thinking:

situations kind of like Mary’s where someone gets pregnant outside of marriage
or if you or someone close to you has gone through a divorce,
or if you’ve been put under disciplinary measures at work or school.

There can be shame associated with those things.

There is a sad and predictable testimony of folks who go through situations like that – which is that when they needed their church family the most, they felt abandoned and shamed instead.

When any of these things happen from a distance it’s very easy to say, “Well this is what is right, this is what the Bible says.” But the tension sets in when it hits closer to home and we feel a pull between what we think God’s law requires of us and the supreme demand of love that our faith in Jesus Christ requires of us.

Which will be seen as the “more Christian” response?

Which will be seen as taking the Bible more seriously? After all, both are found in the Bible.

Might we also fear sometimes that to act out of compassion will give us the reputation of not taking the Bible seriously?

Of being wishy-washy or soft?

Of being too worldly and not righteous?

We might even come to expect that people will disparage our reputations as good, Bible-believing Christians when we lean away from the letter of the law and in the direction of compassion.

In Joseph’s story we see that God turns this righteous man into a **conduit of God’s promise through acts of compassion**. Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth communicates to his first readers, those followers of Jesus who were feeling pulled by the Law and by compassion,

that Jesus' own life as it grew inside Mary's body, was spared in the first **instance because of Joseph's compassionate application of the law.**

A righteous Jewish man will spare his fiancé from judicial punishment and public shame, at the expense of his own reputation as a righteous God-fearing man. He would quietly break off the engagement without publicly shaming Mary.

For Matthew's first readers, that was a radical statement about what it *really* meant to be a righteous person.

But then God takes things another step further.

It was not enough that righteous Joseph would spare Mary and her baby – God tells Joseph to fully embrace Mary and this child. God replaces Joseph's fear of a ruined reputation with joy in being a conduit of God's promises.

God's messenger comes to Joseph in a dream. I picture him finally falling asleep after hours of fitful tossing and turning, echoes of his conversation with Mary swirling in his mind, feelings of betrayal, disbelief, and sadness finally, mercifully, giving way to sleep:

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1:20-21). God reveals his big plan of salvation to Joseph in order that Joseph could move from compassion to courage as he embraced the part he would play in God's big story.

For Matthew's Jewish audience it was a big deal that God's promised Messiah would be from the line of king David. God had long ago promised an heir to David's throne – he had long ago promised that **David's kingdom would be an everlasting kingdom.**

Now that whole Davidic lineage, that whole Davidic kingdom depends on Joseph, son of David, attending to the living voice of God and setting aside his fear of a ruined reputation.

David's eternal kingdom now rests in the hands of a righteous Jewish man who lives at “the heart of the law and not its letter,” who is “already living out the new and higher righteousness of the kingdom” that will be revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus.⁴

God replaces Joseph's fear of a ruined reputation with joy in being a conduit of God's promise – it's through *his* lineage that this child would be adopted into the line of David.

God empowers Joseph to let go of his fear of a ruined reputation and embrace the unbelievable, supernatural, miraculous provisions of God in the birth of this child, whose name would be Jesus.

It would be Jesus who would save the people from their sins, not their own righteousness.

It would be Jesus who would fulfill all the righteous requirements of the law and in doing so save the people from shame, from guilt, from punishment.

Jesus himself would bear the shame, the guilt, the punishment that the law prescribes, so that anyone who follows him could live out the new and higher righteousness of the eternal kingdom of David.

It's like our Advent candle reading this morning said, “For the *joy* set before him, he came down to earth and took on our humanity, endured the cross with all its shame and sat down at the right hand of God in heaven.”

It's as if every scarlet letter ever sown and pinned on a person has been taken up by Christ and buried with him so that **shame can die and joy can be reborn through the work of Jesus Christ.**

⁴ Boring, *NIBC*, electronic version.

There was a girl in my high school who became pregnant when we were in grade 10 or 11, I think. I went to a Christian high school in a pretty conservative town in West Michigan, so teen pregnancies were something of a scandal in our community. This girl became the topic of hurtful rumors and controversy.

But one Bible teacher at our school reacted differently. He wrote the girl and her boyfriend a letter with \$20 inside that said, “Go have dinner together and celebrate this little life.” Did this Bible teacher fear for his reputation? Did he fear that he would be seen as encouraging or endorsing this kind of behavior in young people? I guess it’s possible, but it sure didn’t seem like it. He was openly and unapologetically loving and compassionate to them.

This, I think is evidence of the same God at work, replacing fear of a ruined reputation with joy at being able to be a conduit of God’s mercy and God’s promises. Of course, this situation is not an exact correspondence to Mary’s situation – there was no Holy Spirit conception, for example - but the Bible teachers’ response was empowered by the same God who sent the messenger to Joseph in his fitful sleep.

Do not be afraid of a ruined reputation.

Do not be afraid of extending compassion and mercy.

Do not be afraid of being seen as unrighteous, as too wishy washy.

There is joy to be had in being that conduit of God’s mercy and God’s promises.

The little one growing inside a young and vulnerable Mary has fulfilled the law and has opened the way for an eternal kingdom where shame and condemnation can die and hope, love, peace, and joy can be born.

Let all the earth receive her king –

a king born of a virgin and adopted by Joseph into the eternal line of David,

a king who is also our savior,

a king who is God with us, Immanuel.

Let’s pray: Lord God thank you for this gift of your Word. Help us to believe what we have heard and to hear it in all it’s wild, miraculous, scandalous origins. Help us to live in ways that honour you – help us to live in ways that honour your kingdom of hope, love, peace, and joy, help us to live in ways that resist fear and shame. Give us joy as we seek to be conduits of your mercy and compassion so that all those around us will be drawn more and more to the light of your coming kingdom. In Jesus’ name, Amen.