

“DO NOT BE AFRAID: III – TO TAKE RISKS FOR GOD”

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There are moments in life when someone says something to you and it takes your breath away. All of us have had them. Sometimes the thing they say takes your breath away because your heart is bursting with joy – like, “Will you marry me?” or “You’ve been accepted at the college you’ve always dreamed of attending,” or when your baby says “Mama” or “Dada” for the very first time – or in my case, when one of the babies in my life tried to say “Aunt Karen,” but it came out “Kayen.” Didn’t matter! I cried anyway. I’ll never forget that moment – it was in the parking lot of TGI Friday’s in Newark, and it was my birthday – and by the way, it was Damien! Moments we never forget.

But, sad to say, there are other moments, other things spoken to us that took our breath away because they broke our hearts – like, “the news about your medical tests is not good,” or “your job is being eliminated,” or “I’m leaving you because I’m in love with somebody else.” Moments, indeed, that mark you for a lifetime with a hole in your heart.

Well, in today’s Gospel lesson, Joseph was having one of those moments. Moments when words were spoken that, well, crushed him, on first hearing. He was hearing that his beloved Mary, his betrothed, the young woman with whom he planned on spending the rest of his life, the young woman he would marry in a wedding whose plans were well underway – that dear woman, he was being told was pregnant. And, of course, he knew it was not his child, so he knew what that meant – she had been unfaithful. He was crushed.

Oh, the things he could have done, the ways he could have reacted. Were he living in this day and age, he could have taken to Facebook, or gone on Dr. Phil and aired his grievances, he could have made sure everybody knew that he was the wronged party, and made her pay for her apparent sinfulness.

Truth be told, he could have done much the same thing in that day and age. He could have gone public with it, pointing a finger at Mary, humiliating her, making sure everyone knew he was the injured party, making everyone felt sorry for him and turn their backs on her. He could have done that, and frankly, nobody would have blamed him.

Yet, Matthew tells us he did something quite different. He was a righteous man, Matthew says, and so he took the high road. He didn’t see how they could continue on the path to marriage, but he didn’t want Mary to suffer unduly, so he

was going to just go through the motions of dissolving the betrothal quietly and discreetly, and then go on his way.

That's what he was going to do, but then, just like Mary, Joseph had a visit from an angel one night, who let him in on the whole picture. How they had been chosen by God himself to bear the Savior into the world, and how God would make a way for them, no matter how difficult, how impossible it looked right at that moment.

And God love him, Joseph said yes. Instead of turning away from Mary, he turned to her. Instead of scorning her, he supported her. Instead of feeling wronged, he felt blessed. Truth be told, Joseph treated Mary as God had always treated him – with tender love, loving him in spite of his sins and shortcomings, loving him in good times and bad – always there, always loving and supporting. Or as one writer put it so well when he said, that Joseph love reflected the love of “a God who does not abandon us, who comes alongside us and walks with us, who says, ‘I will be with you, always.’”

Because of God's love for him, Joseph took a risk, and stepped out in faith and walked with Mary on this holy journey. He did it because he loved and cared for her, but more than that, they both did it – they both took this risk, because they wanted to bear Jesus into a world that desperately needed a Savior.

This story, the story of Mary and Joseph, is obviously an incredible story, because they did bear the Savior into the world.

But it's incredible in another way as well, because I think it teaches us a lot about how we treat one another. Joseph had a choice on how to treat Mary – he could crush her, or he could walk alongside her and encourage her.

And friends, we have the power to do the same thing with the people in our lives. By the way we live, the words we say, the actions we take, we have the power to crush people or encourage them. Far too often in our world today, crushing seems to be the prevailing notion. We don't want anyone to get anything over on us, we want to show we have the power, if we're wronged, we broadcast it to the world, and we don't give people breaks – we'd rather drag them through the mud. Don't believe me? Watch the news! It's us versus them, I'm right and you're wrong, and never the twain shall meet. There are no second chances – one strike and you're out.

Oh, that we could learn from Joseph and take the risk to be merciful instead of merciless. That we would choose righteousness, and listening to God for guidance on how to move ahead, on how to forgive, on how to listen to the other person. That we would ask God to open our hearts to see other people as brothers and sisters, not enemies, or people trying to get something over on us.

For when we see others as brothers and sisters, we see them as something holy, and then we behave differently, even showing mercy, as Joseph did with Mary.

And look what happened to them. They joined hands, faced whatever they had to face together, walked forward into a daunting future with hope in their hearts and trust in God, and then, in the lowliness of a stable marveled in awe as, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary brought this precious baby into the world. Oh, how different it could have been, how different her journey could have been, save for the mercy poured on her by dear Joseph.

You know, some people might have called Joseph weak for doing what he did. They might have thought Mary made him look bad, and that he was weak for “letting her get away with it.” Yet, in reality, what he did showed how strong he was – for only a person strong in the Lord can show mercy and compassion no matter what.

Friends, you and I have the opportunity every single day of our lives to take the risk of being merciful and compassionate for God. Every single day in our encounters with others, we can make the choice to crush people, to show our power and control over them, to hurt those who hurt us – or – we can make the choice to encourage them, and show mercy. Every single day we make that choice, in big ways and little ways.

In a beautiful article I read this week entitled “What Does Everyday Mercy Look Like?” the author Vinita Hampton Wright gave some beautiful examples. “Mercy,” she says, “gives you the seat on the bus, acting as if he/she was about to get up anyway rather than making you feel that they are doing you a favor. Mercy does not let out a sigh – you know the one – the wordless disapproval toward the person in the checkout line ahead of you whose card didn’t swipe, or who can’t find her coupons, or whose toddler is having a meltdown. Mercy offers quiet sympathy and does not convey with his/her body that this holdup is ruining the day. Sometimes (she continues) mercy chooses not to send back the food that isn’t just right, simply because the waitress looks overwhelmed.”

Well, she goes on and on, but in the end says, “Mercy makes a habit of giving others the benefit of the doubt. Mercy helps others succeed. Mercy clears the way for others, so that they can walk on an even path, no matter how halting their steps or injured their souls.” (On-line, “What Does Everyday Mercy Look Like?, Vinita Hampton Wright, National Catholic Reporter, 8/26/14)

And then, I read a beautiful story about a woman in South America sorely in need of mercy. She was a mother with young children whose husband had abandoned her. She had no steady income. When odd jobs were scarce, sadly she would prostitute herself to put food on the table for her children.

During that time, she would go to the local Catholic church and they would help her with food and goods for her family. One day, around Christmas, she went to the church and asked to speak to the priest. The priest was a man by the name of Jorge Bergoglio. He thought she was simply going to thank him for the help.

Instead she said to him, “I’m here today to thank you because you never stopped calling me Senora.” You see, he showed her mercy and compassion at a time when others would throw stones at her and call her names for doing what she was doing. But he showed her mercy.

Later he wrote about the experience and said, “For her, the fact that the parish priest continued to call her Senora, even though he probably knew how she led her life during the months when she could not work, was as important – or perhaps even more important than the concrete help that we gave her.”

That parish priest could have crushed that woman, instead he encouraged her, he respected her, he had mercy on her. By the way, that parish priest later became Pope Francis. (On-line, “How a Prostitute’s Story Taught Pope Francis the Meaning of Mercy,” Catholic News Agency).

Oh, dear friends, we’re living in a time when, too often, people are crushed rather than encouraged and shown mercy. As children of God and disciples of Christ, we have the opportunity to be different – to take the risk to be different than the world around us – to be encouragers and bearers of grace and mercy for all of God’s children. It is, yes, a risky thing. Others might call us weak, might think we’re foolish, might think we’re letting people get things over on us.

Don’t worry about that. Be and do what Christ calls you to be and do. See others as your brothers and sisters, not enemies. Try to put yourself in their shoes, see the world as they see it, see their struggles and their sorrows.

But most of all, do it, because like Mary and Joseph, in so doing – in showing grace, mercy and compassion to all – you will, as they did, help bear Jesus into this hurting world. As we prepare to celebrate his birth tonight, it is the greatest gift we can give him. May it be so!

Amen.