



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Joseph’s Footsteps”

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Centering Thoughts

*Rumors are flying all over galilee these days. And, Mary, I’m trying to be cool.
The New Pornographers, ‘Joseph Who Understood’*

*I felt something I had never felt before, a mixture of fear and pride. I liked it. This was fatherhood.
The biggest mistake anyone could make, and yet universally accepted. I had arrived.
Carl-John X. Veraja*

Sermon

Good Morning! When I was first asked to speak this week, on Father’s Day, I was a little apprehensive. I doubt it will come as much of a surprise to most of you, but I am not a father. In fact, if my life continues in the way that I anticipate, I will never be a father. What’s more, I’ll admit here in front of you all that I actually really don’t like Father’s Day. A few of you may have noticed that my father isn’t here this morning. Admittedly, my father is frequently not in services, preferring, as he does, to worship at Saint Mattress’s on Sunday mornings. But not this week. This week, my father is spending his Father’s Day, as he has every Father’s Day, in Canon City, Colorado with the UGA Geology Field School. Given that I haven’t actually celebrated this holiday with my daddy, it isn’t that surprising that I’m not its biggest fan. The thing is though, I dislike this holiday so much because of the difference. My dad is around and has been around for me most of my life, so the contrasting lack is more noticeable. Since I was lucky enough to have a father who was involved, I’m more aware of it when he isn’t here.

Now we’ve established that I will most likely never be a father in the traditional understanding of the word. And we’ve established that I am not a fan of the day itself. This was my quandary in trying to figure out what on earth I was going to talk about up here this morning. I am probably the like eleventy-seventh person down on a list of people qualified to talk about this day. So I did what I’ve done every time I’ve had a question in the past few years—I hit the books, I talked to my friends, I listened to music, and I came here. Somewhere in all of those sources of knowledge and guidance, I remembered one of my favorite people from Christian scripture: Joseph. I mean of course the father of Jesus, not the one with the fabulous coat.

We don’t hear a lot about Joseph most of the time. He isn’t really the flashy figure in the story. Mary is the one who miraculously gave birth. We can probably agree that Mary’s child, Jesus, had

a somewhat notable life, made kind of an impact. But we don't talk about Joseph very often, and we should, because he is truly one of the most remarkable men from a time that is full of remarkable men. In actual fact, Joseph is only mentioned a few times. Most of us when we think of him think, "right, Joseph-Jesus' dad. That's why they were in Bethlehem, so Joseph could be counted in the census." And that's fair, because that's about all the Gospels have to say about him. As a matter of fact, only Matthew really says anything specific about Joseph. In that book, Joseph is described as a righteous man, who upon discovering his betrothed is pregnant chooses to quietly put her aside. That may not sound particularly generous, but it should be taken into consideration that the societal standards for behavior, justice, and manliness would have placed it entirely in Joseph's rights to have Mary disgraced and stoned. By deciding to quietly put her aside he was risking his own position in society and his own future chances of marriage, family, and wealth in order to show mercy. Now, it didn't come to that—the gospel tells us that divine interference convinced Joseph to go ahead with the planned marriage, and name the child. It's worth noting here that the phrase "name the child" means to accept and claim that child *as one's own*.

If you are familiar with Judeo-Christian teachings you can probably remember a lot of stories of fathers. Abraham, Isaac, Noah, even Lot. If you're really familiar with these stories, you might note that these are not the best examples of fatherhood. For example, Abraham may have done many wonderful things and been a truly godly man, but imagine yourself as Isaac in that story—not the best memories of Dad, right? Ishmael may have gotten the bright side of that relationship. At least he and his mother, Hagar, were just banished, he didn't have to face the utter betrayal of the father-son hike ending with a little friendly sacrifice. Imagine how nervous Isaac must have gotten every time his dad picked up a knife after that. The others aren't much better. And that's the thing—we know so much more about the complicated relationship between these fathers and their children than we've ever heard about Joseph. And that is a shame, because Joseph was probably one of the best examples possible for us. Examples of what not to do are nice, but a few hints about good practices are always appreciated too.

I can't imagine Jesus was an easy child to raise. I don't mean he was mischievous or rebellious, though there was probably some of that if he was truly human. What I mean is that Joseph had to take up a heavy task when he accepted the role of father. He probably didn't know how the story would end. I can't imagine that he could have borne the pain if he had. But just on the surface, Joseph was asked to be the father to a god. In the tradition, Jesus was sent to earth for the purpose of saving humanity, but he was sent in human form for a reason. Now, I think a commonality among fathers is that part of the task is teaching the children how to be human, but most fathers don't face quite the same uphill battle in that respect. It may have been full of joy, but it was probably hard, and challenging, and frustrating too. Joseph is so inspiring to me because he could have said, "No, this is too much, this is not my responsibility. Let someone else carry this." It would have been totally understandable. After all, the child wasn't his, this child wasn't even fully human. But that's the rub isn't it? Being a father doesn't come down to genetics. A father isn't made by some biological function. A father is defined by actions. The person who changes the diapers, sits with the colicky baby at 1 in the morning, and then again at 2, 3, 4, and 5. A father is the person who teaches you how to play catch, how to climb trees, and how to be strong. A father shows you how to be the wisest, most compassionate, honorable, and kind person you can be. Your father is the person who holds you accountable to your own actions and holds you up when the actions of others are hurtful. And Joseph chose that. He chose that when he married Mary, probably not understanding what he was signing up for— after all, does anyone really understand

what they're signing up for when they decide to become parents—but he chose it again, every morning when he got out of bed, every day when he instructed Jesus in the trade of carpentry and traits of humanity, and every night when he put the eventual savior to bed. As he felt the unmitigated terror when, as a young boy Jesus ran away to the temple and Joseph realized his child was missing, he chose again. He chose, with every action, to be a father.

It isn't a simple choice. You don't just decide once to be a parent. Being a parent is full of choices, every single moment—and I'm sure that there are even more moments than I realize, given that I still haven't made the decision for the first time. I've been lucky in my own life. My daddy is a wonderful example who has chosen with every day to be a dad. As I said before, I kind of hate this day, but it's because of the contrast. My dad has been there for me, and what's more, I've been blessed with a multitude of people who act as surrogate fathers. In a lot of ways, I could be said to have around 3 or 4 fathers.

I have a friend, Mandie, who has one of the best relationships I can imagine with her dad. He supports her, he champions her, and he calls her out when she's wrong. He pushes her to be the best person she can be. He's been a kind and generous man for her whole life, and knowing Mandie, that has probably involved a few challenges. The fact that Moe shares no genes with Mandie or her three rowdy and difficult brothers in no way changes the fact that he is her father.

And that's the heart of this. Being a father is not constrained by genetics. It isn't constrained by legality. It isn't even constrained by gender. Father is more than a descriptive title for male parent. "Father" is a job description. "Father" is a code word for the act of encouraging, uplifting, and honoring our children and youth. "Father" is an instruction to teach, love, and make space for children in your heart and life. "Father" is a tiny little word for the biggest choice that any of us can make.

When I think about the story of Jesus I cannot help but be drawn away from the words on the page, to all the words, to all of the story that didn't make it on to the page. When we tell this story we forget that so much of who and what Jesus was came from this simple, unassuming carpenter from Bethlehem who made a monumental choice. We talk about following in the footsteps of Christ, being kind, merciful, and just, loving our neighbors and our enemies. I am definitely not going to stand in a pulpit and disagree with any of those sentiments. But the thing is, that didn't all come from Christ. If we accept that Jesus was divine, then if he had inherently had all of those traits without any guidance, he could have skipped the entire messy, painful, tragic humanity thing and come as he was. It would have been so much easier, but it didn't happen that way. He needed to be taught what it meant to be a good man. If we take the approach that Christ was just that, a good man with no hint of divinity, then Joseph's teachings are all that much more impressive.

So yes, it isn't a bad idea to follow in the footsteps of Jesus as we live our lives. The world could do with more kindness, compassion, and love. But as we go about our lives, as we all endeavor to take up in some small way the role of "father," it might do us some good to remember the man whose footsteps Jesus himself followed.

May it be so.