

The Oscar for the Supporting Role

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

For me the best part of most movies are the surprising roles. Not the stars with the big Hollywood credits, but the small parts that stand out, the small roles that startle you for their beauty, good acting that supports the story and the other people in the cast. Paul Giamatti and Lupito Nyong'o were amazing in *12 Years a Slave*; Tommy Lee Jones carried some scenes in *No Country for Old Men*; Viola Davis is all I remember of *Fences*. Morgan Freeman upstages everyone as the chauffeur in *Driving Miss Daisy*. Each of these performances won an Oscar because these actors with small parts made the story sing.

We have a brilliant supporting actor here in the Christmas story. He's a good person, taken by surprise by a problem he didn't see coming and didn't deserve. The man has no lines; it's not a speaking part but plays an important role to play in every Christmas pageant, and every creche scene. Of course, this person is Joseph. The Bible says that Joseph was a good man, Matthew tells us he was righteous, which means he was good-hearted, decent and someone you could trust. Joseph didn't rush into marriage but waited until he could support a family. Then he was betrothed to a lovely young woman who was also conscientious and disciplined and kind. They were both excited to be betrothed and he seemed to really love her already. So, it must have been a shock to discover that Mary was pregnant before the wedding. Suddenly, everything changed. But what Joseph did next was unusual and exemplary. It transformed the two of them and the child they would call their own. Let's take a closer look.

In the first place the story reminds us that when things are confusing, sometimes all you have is kindness. When Mary told him she was pregnant, and he knew it wasn't his child, it must have been an awful disappointment. What a blow to his pride. What a sense of betrayal. For most couples then and now, this kind of news is a deal-breaker. For most people the weight of this kind of announcement is a betrayal of the covenant.

Joseph was wise and secure. He knew women bear the greatest burden for unexpected pregnancies. He had the right to take Mary to court, make a public spectacle of her predicament and divorce her. He knew her shame would last the rest of her life. Scholars question whether she could be charged with adultery, but now Jewish scholars say that's unlikely. Her family would take her in begrudgingly, but she'd have a stigma. Like Hester Prynne, she'd have a mark on her that would haunt her.

So, Joseph led with love and rose above his own disappointment and refused to put her through that. He was decent. He may have assumed she loved someone else. So he pushed aside the impulse for revenge. He did not give into wounded pride but led with his generous heart. Just then, as he made this decision, an angel came to him in a dream, urging Joseph to stay, to continue as Mary's husband and raise her child as his own.

What is it that makes a person kind? Why do some people rise above their own hurt feelings to think of someone else. In her poem on Kindness Naomi Shihab Nye says kindness is born out of hurt. Kindness comes as we reflect on our pain and decide to do things differently.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.

You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes...

only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

When we are hurt those wounds that come all undeserved can either make us hard, calculating, well-defended or cruel, or in some rare people they can break us open. What emerges from those wounded cracks in our souls? Decency. Its decency that holds us together, like a life-raft on life's treacherous seas. The only good revenge when life is unfair is to live with compassion for others.

In the second place, the story says, don't underestimate your supporting roles in life. Once he decided to stay with Mary, Joseph kept his young family safe. He walked with Mary to Bethlehem, then advocated for her when there was no room in the inn. He found a stable, protected them during her homebirth. Joseph worried about Herod and eventually secreted them all across the sands to Egypt.

Without a drop of narcissism, he put his energy into his new little boy. He teaches Jesus what he knows about God, and how we need to trust that God has a plan for our lives. He taught Jesus that your greatest legacy is often wrapped up in your ability to point to someone greater than yourself and live into God's plan.

We don't know exactly what he said, but we can see his imprint on Jesus. When Jesus treats lepers, decently, there's Joseph's fingerprints. When Jesus is impatient with hypocrisy, that's Joseph's integrity, too. When Jesus treats women with dignity instead of the scorn so many people had and still have, that instinct comes, in part from what he saw at home. When Jesus forgives his disciples, you see the influence of a dad who always led with understanding.

It would be easy to dismiss your role in the messy families we all belong to. We cannot see the impact we're having on others. Like Joseph, you may be raising children, not your own biologically. Or maybe you are shepherding someone else in a crisis right now, feeling inadequate but your steady care might be holding everyone together. Maybe you feel like you're always at the edge of the family photo, you may be the one others lean on. The poster for the movie, *Driving Miss Daisy*, didn't feature Miss Daisy, it focused on Morgan Freeman's character looking in the rearview mirror. Supporting roles can make all the difference.

Finally, Joseph is a hero because he didn't sacrifice the good for the perfect. His idea of a perfect wedding had been changed, but he had a remarkable marriage. This child who called their betrothal into question brought gifts no one could imagine to their home and their hearts. Sometimes when life does not go as planned, we teeter on the edge of understanding and our anger and disappointment grows large, and we stand in danger of throwing away what is possible because we did not get the perfect thing we hoped for. So often God is not in the perfect things we imagined but the confusing messes that take us by surprise. Then we have to choose – whether to have a temper tantrum and throw away the gifts right before us because our plans are all in

disarray or whether to grow up and see how much good we can realize when we stop bemoaning the loss of what we thought was perfect. It's so often in the disappointments of our lives that new life is born. It's through the scars of our lives that goodness often grows most fiercely. It's in the rough patches that God meets us with generous offerings of new possibilities. It is in our confusion that we so often find the answers to prayers we didn't even know we were praying.

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
on Sunday, December 18, 2022 at 9:30 AM