

Engaged or Betrothed?
Matthew 1:18-25
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Approximately one hundred million dollars. That's how much his divorce from Elin Nordgren cost professional golfer Tiger Woods. Around eighty million dollars. That's how much her divorce from Guy Ritchie cost entertainer Madonna. But those numbers are nothing compared to what it cost art world tycoon Alec Wildenstein to divorce from Jocelyn Wildenstein. He paid a whopping 2.5 billion dollars to escape that marriage. Now *that* is some commitment to divorce.

On the other hand, there are countless people who spend their lives together and never walk down the aisle. In so-called common-law marriages, and in relationships not permitted by law to be called marriages, the partners share everything together but the piece of paper – and the rights to which it entitles them. Some of those relationships end in a leave-taking to be sure, but so many more endure “until death do we part” even if those words were never spoken as vows. Now *that* is some commitment to staying together.

The intricacies of human relationships, especially of the long-term partner variety, continue to elude psychologists of all stripes. What cements one relationship while another dissolves? Which are the bonds that endure and which are those that come undone? We may not be able to predict them, but it seems clear that our commitments have different values, financial and otherwise. Our getting

together and staying together, or not staying together, depends upon a lot of factors to be sure, but one of them is our commitment, our willingness to stay in the game when the game gets tough.

In Joseph and Mary's world, this is how the marriage game was played. It was a two-stage process, the first part being the deal making part, and the second the consummating part. In the first part, the couples' families would come to a contractual arrangement, the deed was signed, so to speak, and the period of "betrothal" began. This is to say that the couple was basically married at that point, although they weren't yet living together. That came roughly a year later, and it was celebrated with a wedding feast that could last three days, like the famous one in Cana at which Jesus changes a little water into wine. But going back to that first stage, it was more than what we call today being "engaged" which is how the version I read tonight translated the situation between Mary and Joseph. In the NIV, it gets translated as "pledged," but that too sounds more like Mary was wearing a promise ring than a wedding band. Indeed, if they really were just engaged, or just promised to one another, as we understand those words today, there would have been no need for Joseph to divorce Mary for her supposed infidelity. She might still have done something unseemly, and maybe embarrassing for Joseph, but he could have just called the whole thing off without having to go through the process of a divorce. In fact, God was pretty wise to wait to put Mary and Joseph in a family way until after they were betrothed, but before she moved

in, even if it had unpleasant consequences for both of them. Clearly, if Jesus had been conceived after she moved in, it would be pretty hard to claim a miraculous impregnation. And if it were before they were betrothed, Joseph's incentive wouldn't have been quite so great to stay with her. To put it into our own terms, being only engaged means you can get out while the gettin' is good. You might lose the deposit on the banquet hall you rented for the reception, and the postage to return the gifts that came in advance, but it won't cost you alimony or the division of assets. But married? Married means it's going to cost you to call it off, economically and socially. And in New Testament-speak, betrothed is married, and that's what was weighing on Joseph's heart and mind when the angel of his dreams came calling.

Matthew tells us that Joseph had already decided to break it off, and for good and faithful reasons. What he thought Mary had done, and what everyone else would certainly think Mary had done, whether with Joseph or someone else, was grounds for divorce under the law. As uncharitable as it sounds, to divorce Mary was actually to uphold the honor of God. Mary, to the world's eyes, had broken faith with her family, Joseph and his family, and God, and this was no trifling matter. And so when Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, we should not be surprised to hear that he was going to divorce her. Again, the translation I read is a little weak in making this point. It simply says he was going to "dismiss her quietly" which sounds like just breaking up with her. What it really

means however is that Joseph was going to divorce her but not make it difficult for her. He wasn't going to turn her over to those who might judge and then stone her to death, as was one possible outcome for her discretion. It must have been a hard decision for him, no doubt. But one in good conscience he felt he must make.

That's why as terrifying as the visit of the angel in his dreams must have been, it must have been even more relief-producing. You see, Joseph *was* betrothed, and not just engaged, and now he wouldn't have to do what he had planned to do. He had heard from a higher power that he was off the hook. And so he chose to let God mend his relationship with Mary. He could still have divorced her. We often credit Mary for choosing to say yes to God but I think we need to give Joseph the same credit, and maybe more. In Mary's case, it was probably a little harder to say no since she was already pregnant, and saying no to that was a little more complicated in the old days. But Joseph's "yes" meant that he allowed the community to believe that he either chose to remain married to an adulteress, or that he had consummated their relationship before the customary time. Neither of these were good options for his reputation, and they never get addressed later in the story, so we don't know which story he chose to tell, or whether he suffered for it, but Joseph's "yes" meant he was a "righteous man" both with respect to the law and in terms of his relationship to God. You see, Joseph was now free to do what God needed him to do, namely to claim Jesus as his own, even if he was not his own, to take him home and to name him. And so he did.

Joseph's predicament came to me this week as I read a blog post this week. It was about another issue, but it seems applicable to Joseph's case as well, and our lives at Advent and beyond. This is what the blogger wrote: "When faced with the choice between being theologically correct...as if this is even possible...and being morally responsible, I'll go with morally responsible every time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian during World War II. He firmly held the theological position of nonviolence. He believed that complete pacifism was theologically correct. And yet, in the midst of the war, he conspired to assassinate Adolf Hitler; to kill a fellow man. Why? Because in light of what he saw happening to the Jews around him by the Nazis, he felt that it would be morally irresponsible not to. Between the assassination of Hitler and nonviolence, he felt the greater sin would be nonviolence." This is the choice, if you can call it that, which the angel gave Joseph. Stick to the theologically correct position and divorce her, or choose the morally responsible one and take her home. Of course, Joseph wasn't presented with this choice in its starkest form, because he does in fact receive the news that in fact Mary has not done anything wrong. But I would like to think, as the righteous man he was, that Joseph would have made the same choice anyway, even if God hadn't given him the entire story, but simply because God had asked him to do it.

In the end, the real question is not so much was Joseph engaged or betrothed to Mary, but was he engaged or betrothed to God? Was his righteousness

something he could leave behind to save his reputation or ease his disappointment? Or was it something to stick with even when there were consequences for doing so? It's the same question we confront even if the stakes aren't as high as they were for either Joseph or Bonhoeffer.

The story is told of one of the times when the seventeenth century preacher and author, John Bunyan, of "Pilgrims' Progress" fame, was in Bedford jail, and some of his persecutors in London heard that he was often out of the prison. They sent an officer to talk with the jailer about the matter, and to try to prove that he was to get back there in the middle of the night after being elsewhere. Indeed, Bunyan was at home with his family, but he became so restless that he could not sleep. So he told his wife that although the jailer had given him liberty to stay until the morning, in his uneasiness, he felt he must immediately return. And so he did, and the jailer was none too pleased to be awakened at such an hour. Well, early in the morning the messenger came, and interrogating the jailer, asked "Are all the prisoners safe?" "Yes." "Is John Bunyan safe?" "Yes." "Let me see him." He was called, and appeared, and all was well. After the messenger was gone, the jailer said to Bunyan, "Well, you may go in and out again just when you think proper, for you know when to return better than I can tell you." If you know Bunyan's story, you know he was engaged to Christ for a long time before he became betrothed. In an earlier time, he might have taken full advantage of the right he had been given to return at dawn. But betrothed as he was, and knowing how being

discovered would jeopardize the message he broke the law to preach, he made the choice that saved both himself and the jailer too.

Joseph's encounter with the angel in his dream is a glimpse early in Matthew of the Gospel Jesus would later proclaim, that although the law is a fine, useful, divine and even beautiful thing, compassion, justice, mercy, and love must be its constant companions, and that those things are in short supply without the one whose coming the angel revealed and whose arrival we celebrate again two nights from tonight. Joseph needed to be asked, commanded if you will, to do the right thing even as he maintained his righteousness, but at least he had his angels. We don't all get angels when we need them. But perhaps we get that nudge in the middle of the night that Bunyan got, or remember the advice our friend once gave us, or maybe even that moral compass that takes so long to find and is constantly challenged. Or maybe we remember those who have gone before us, like our man Joseph, and made the choice to stick around in the faith. May we all celebrate our betrothal as we close out this Advent season. Amen.