

Lucy was a mother of six children. Things were pretty good until about middle school. Her oldest daughter died from cancer and that's when her husband left her for another woman. The children seemed to change after that. They got into trouble a lot. Most started using drugs in one form or another. Lucy on the other hand, probably tolerated more than she should. She became a classic enabler. She gave to her children to the point of facing eviction. She would simply deny any damage they did in her life and would take issue with anyone who tried to tell her different. She loved them to a fault--unconditionally.

Her kids continued to live with their mom on and off; mostly on. Once in a while between her children's marriages and divorces, new boyfriends and babies being born one or more would be away for a short while only to find his/her way back when they didn't pay their rent. In recent years while renting her home along the river a 100-year flood forced them to abandon almost everything they had. Mom eventually got another place and once again her daughter moved in with her along with her new boyfriend and four boys. They would come and go all hours of the day; steal her money and her medications; eat her food; drive her car; and still she loved her children and gave to them whatever they wanted and Lucy steadfastly denied any problems. Lucy is always broke, but somehow gets by. Lucy's friends are frustrated with the situation because they believe that Lucy needs to see the reality around her. Lucy's children love her even though they do what they do. How you would be a friend to Lucy, love Lucy?

How do you balance out God's love with responsibility? What's your rationale? It's Christmas Day and we are confronted once again with the birth of Christ. But why did Jesus have to come? Because sin has ruined everything God once called very good. Lucy's family is a micro chasm of what sin does. Some of us can shake our heads and tell ourselves, "that's not me." Thank God if Lucy's picture isn't yours. But that shouldn't be all we do. We must do something for Lucy if we know her. Otherwise, we are no better than the Rich man who ignored a very needy Lazarus. And lest we forget you are like Lucy and her kids. Christmas is for you because you are sinful. You will by that very nature act in ways that deny your need for Jesus. You will by that very nature act in a way that causes you to rebel against God, act selfishly, and in fact enable your sin and then excuse that sin. I have not met a human being who is not dysfunctional. We are all dysfunctional on some level. And yet Jesus loves us unconditionally with His cross and resurrection. Does this mean that Jesus is going to enable our sin? As Paul says Romans 6:1 What shall we say, then? "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" No, that would be stupid and irresponsible.

Matthew 1:18-25 is where we meet Joseph and discover a man who balances love with righteousness, love with sacrificial obedience, and love with faith. And we will do well to learn from him.

First, the Bible tells us here in :19 that Joseph was "a righteous man" --that is, he wanted to do the right thing in God's eyes and according to God's Law. The pregnancy of Mary with Jesus was a real challenge to a righteous man. Logically, there was only one explanation for this: that she had been unfaithful to him while she was engaged to him. In Jewish culture, when you were "betrothed" to someone, it was as binding as the Marriage itself so legal action would have to be taken... divorce papers. So, Joseph was going to do the right thing putting God ahead of his own wishes or desires. Mary was found (or so he thought) to be immoral, and so he was going to do the right thing and sever that relationship. He was a righteous man, who had high, godly, righteous standards. He would not compromise them, not even for Mary.

Joseph was not only an example of a man of righteousness and holiness; he was also an example of sensitivity and love. The second part of verse 19 says "and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly." This is huge. Joseph could have acted like the characters of John 8 who haul out a woman caught in the act of adultery. Exposed to the world for all to see the religious leaders, while holding their stones ready to stone her for her adultery, ask Jesus what to do with her. He who is without sin cast the first stone. No one did. Joseph does not want to hurt Mary nor expose her to the same ridicule of the pious religious leaders who as we later find out, were hypocrites anyway. So, he makes up his mind to send her away, divorce her quietly without injury. But then he learns what he must do instead. Take her home Joseph. Likewise, Jesus teaches us be the one to have mercy, be the Samaritan.

Likewise, we may not have to participate in Lucy's sin but we also don't need to contribute to her problems either. We don't have to run her nor her children down. We can give to her needed things (even gifts for her kids) if we are blessed enough to offer them but not things that may contribute to the problem like, in this case cash. Cash in a household of addicts is not a good choice. But food might be. Or something Christmas oriented, at least a card. We don't have to live in her house but we will do well to keep in contact with her without trying to "fix her" or her kids at this point. If anything does change, she will need you to be there.

Secondly, Joseph balances love with sacrificial obedience. He never makes the matter about himself, his dreams for marriage, or his need desire to have a son of his own. Joseph never whines nor complains.

Joseph follows through. And so, Joseph takes Mary home as His wife. That in itself carries its own baggage. We may associate many negative things with a dysfunctional family like Lucy's. Joseph's little town in Nazareth probably had many pious comments about Mary's apparent morality. "How could a nice young man like Joseph possibly put-up unclean woman like Mary?" In small towns like Nazareth everyone has an opinion. In Mark 6:3 in Nazareth Jesus was rejected with the words, "Isn't this Mary's son, the carpenter..." And they took offense at him. The words are harsh and subtly imply that Jesus was illegitimate. And Yet Joseph willingly took the sting out of this by adopting Jesus as his own son and teaching him the carpenter trade as loving father would do.

Do you think that Joseph didn't notice unrighteous behavior? Do you think he wouldn't see the trouble of Lucy's family? A righteous person will naturally see what is sinful and unhealthy. So did Jesus. Jesus spent real time with dysfunctional prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors, broken lives. He sees Lucy very clearly, better than anyone in fact, even Lucy. But his command is to love those like Lucy. Loving her unconditionally does not mean He tolerates sin or condones it. The sinful woman caught in adultery was told to go and sin no more. Jesus didn't have to spell it out for her. She knew she was good as dead in the hands of the religious leaders. Not so with Jesus. Jesus acknowledges the adultery that dragged her into Jesus' presence nearly cost everything and still could. Loving unconditionally is not necessarily an acceptance of what her family does. Quite the opposite. Jesus loved her by giving us all something that will change us, His life, His death to pay for those sins, forgiveness in His death and eternal life. He gave us Christmas.

Finally, Joseph balances faith with every day life. The few things written about Joseph tell us that he was a carpenter. He wasn't wealthy. His offering for Mary that is required after the birth of a son at the Temple was the poor man's offering of two doves. Most important while working among Gentiles, Romans who hated Jews and blasphemed God, Joseph never allowed his faith to be compromised.

Someone like Joseph may not be able to change what's going on in Lucy's household but he would encourage her family as he serves own. He would love them by defending the dignity of their importance in God's eyes—Jesus came for them, died for them on the cross, and rose on Easter to give them hope. Joseph would be an example to them by his life and conduct.

Maybe we don't balance things as well as Joseph. Maybe we are more like Lucy and her family than Joseph. But Christmas is for misfits and the misguided as well as the Miss America's that seem to have it all together. We all have a place in this picture. Many of us know someone like Lucy and her family. Much about her picture can be better. So can we. And we may only be able to have a small impact; in some way only God may be able to measure. But that's exactly what makes Joseph special—all the little things, the acts of obedience, the acts of righteousness, the acts of faith done with love just as Jesus came because God so loved the world. Christmas remembers the love of God for Lucy and for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Pastor Matt Woods
John 3:30