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**“Love that Overcomes  
Apathy”**

**Matthew 1:18-25**

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*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.*

*But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of God appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to marry her, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a child whom you will name Jesus, for that child will save the people from their sins."*

*All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by God through the prophet: "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."*

*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of God commanded, and married her, but he had no marital relations with Mary until she had borne a child; and Joseph named the child Jesus.*

*Matthew 1:18-25*

Insults are all the rage. It has never been so easy for so many people to say so many horrible things. In the online world, people say nasty things we hope they would never say in person.

The anonymity afforded by the internet leads people to write cruel comments: Being rude is so popular that people are afraid they will run out of offensive responses. There are websites that provide lists of abusive observations for

those who need help being cruel.

Some suggestions are just mean: "It's adorable when you try to explain stuff you don't understand."

Some focus on the recipient's intelligence: "I lack the time and the crayons to properly explain this to you."

Some are clever: "I hope your pillow is warm on both sides."

Some are snarky: "Hurting you is the last thing I want to do. But it's definitely on the list."

Not many are both theological and scientific: "God loves you, but everyone else thinks you're evidence that evolution can go backwards."

Many television commentators know how to be mean. They keep us paranoid and upset with each other. The more hatred they spread; the more people watch. They defend racism, sexism, homophobia, materialism, and selfishness as though they are defensible. We are not surprised by anti-Semitism or Islamophobia. We are not as upset as we used to be. We expect people to be mean. We expect toxic communication.

We would like to think the toxicity that surrounds us does not affect nice people like us. Most of us are not tweeting angry comments about whether Taylor Swift should be Time's Person of the Year. We are not the people who do the name-calling, but it is in our heads. We think nasty comments. We think less of people whose politics are not as rational as our politics. We treat those who have different opinions as caricatures.

Our perspective becomes more cynical. We react to news that is not really news, that we would be better off ignoring. We know it is not helpful, but we feel stuck

with negative thoughts. With all the anger out there, apathy seems like a step in the right direction. When people are fighting, staying out of it makes us feel smart. When everyone is being mean, doing nothing looks nice. If everyone else is Scrooge, then not being Scrooge feels like an accomplishment.

Jerry Seinfeld put it, "The true spirit of Christmas is people being helped by people other than me."

We are tempted to be reasonably nice people, keep five of the Ten Commandments, go to church once a month, give money we do not need, spend time we can spare, and try to do a little more good than bad.

Joseph could try to do a little more good than bad. He could take the easy way out. Not getting angry would have been enough to make him look like a good guy.

The tradition is that Joseph is older than Mary. He may have been an established carpenter by the time he starts noticing Mary. He realizes he better marry her before someone else does. He gets his father to arrange a deal with Mary's father. A betrothal is more legally binding than an engagement. Being betrothed is being married without benefits.

They have lined up the rabbi and organist. They have ordered the flowers. Joseph's brother has planned the bachelor party. Things are right on schedule until Mary starts acting strange. She wants Joseph to understand something that he is not getting. This feeling of confusion would be good preparation for most marriages, but then Joseph gets the devastating news that his fiancée is going to have a child that is not his. Joseph is stunned. What is he to think? Mary is not who he thought she was. How

could she have done this?

Joseph imagines that people are already snickering, raising their eyebrows, and planting their tongues in their cheeks. People being as gossipy as they are, they will want the embarrassing details. Will they know it is not Joseph's? Will they know that Joseph knows? Whose was it really?

Joseph's brother is eager to give advice: "Get out while you can. You don't have any reason to think she'll change. You don't have to mess up your life."

When Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man, we picture a cautious, careful carpenter whose work is all the excitement he wants. Carpenters are all about being careful, "Measure twice, cut once." He is concerned for Mary, but if your fiancée is pregnant and you were out of town when it happened, it is hard not to feel self-righteous.

After several sleepless nights, Joseph decides to bow out of the Christmas pageant. The right thing to do is put this behind him, get on with his life, let Mary get on with hers. He will break off the engagement quietly. When people ask, he will just say, "The marriage wasn't going to work."

The prophet Isaiah can wax philosophical about people who have walked in darkness seeing a great light, but for Joseph it is about his fiancé getting pregnant without him. He will cancel the caterer. But just as he is starting to feel okay about the decision, Joseph has a dream in which an angel tells him to marry her.

Most people having this dream would have no trouble ignoring it. This is not normal. This does not make sense, but Joseph does what love tells him to do. Joseph takes his place beside this woman in trouble.

When Joseph could have cut his losses, he stays.

Against all odds, Joseph pushes aside the facts and follows where love leads him. He will marry a pregnant teenager and be the adopted father of her child. When the baby is born and people count the months, they will not think of Joseph as quite so honorable. He will look into the face of the baby and be unable to see the reflection of his own face.

But Joseph thinks, "Whether it's true or not, this is what love's telling me to do."

If we think of Christmas as God's invitation to be safe and warm, we are mistaken. Christmas is God's invitation to love in a way that defies prevailing opinions. The evidence is that people are mean. The evidence is that they do not care. The evidence is that it is easier to stay out of it.

But the Christmas story suggests that we love people who are not kind, trust those who will use us, and believe that good will overcome evil even though that is not what most people think. Christmas is choosing love over apathy, thinking and acting with love, rather than giving in to the indifference that surrounds us.

Louise Erdrich writes, "Life will break you. Nobody can protect you from that, and being alone won't either, for solitude will also break you with its yearning. You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason you are here on earth. You have to risk your heart. You are here to be swallowed up. And when it happens that you are broken, or betrayed, or left, or hurt, or death brushes too near, let yourself sit by an apple tree and listen to the apples falling all around you in heaps, wasting their sweetness. Tell yourself that you tasted as many as you could."

When people talk about the real meaning of Christmas, they do not usually recognize that the real meaning of Christmas is not that we get to be safe and warm. Christmas teaches us that what most people think is important does not matter, that love is the criterion by which everything is interpreted, and that love is harder than we realize. Christmas is God's invitation to bear others' burdens, ease others' loads, and brighten others' lives.

Love teaches us to move past what we have done for others, and remember what others have done for us. Love teaches us to think less about what the world owes us, and more about what we owe the world. Love teaches us to put our rights in the background, our duties in the middle, and our chances to do more in the foreground.

To see that other people are just as real as we are, and look beyond their faces to their hearts, hungry for love. To own up to the truth that the best reasons for our existence are not what we are going to get out of life, but what we are going to give to life. To close our book of complaints against the management of the universe, and look for a place where we can sow seeds of happiness.

Love teaches us to consider the needs of children, and remember the difficulties of people growing old. Love teaches us to stop asking how much our friends love us and ask whether we love them enough. Love teaches us to keep in mind the things that others have to bear in their hearts, to understand what those who are closest to us really want, without waiting for them to tell us. Love helps us make a grave for our ugly thoughts, and a garden for our kindly feelings. Love helps us believe that love is the strongest thing in the world—stronger than apathy.

If we live in the love of Christmas, we lose interest in judging other people. We lose interest in conflict.

We lose some of our ability to worry. We have frequent episodes of appreciation. We have contented feelings of connectedness with others. We have an increased susceptibility to the love extended by others as well as the uncontrollable urge to extend love. We have frequent attacks of smiling.

The birth of Jesus made possible not just a new way of understanding life, but a new way of living it. At Christmas, God invites us to small things we can do with great love. Buy daffodils. Buy a friend a cup of coffee. Hold the door open. Give up our seat on the subway. Thank the person who made our sandwich. Send a text to someone who is not doing well.

Decide not to get mad in the middle of a meeting. Be kind to someone thirty years older, or thirty years younger. Give the waitress a big tip. Look poor people in the eye. Speak to someone we do not speak to. Listen to people who do not get heard.

Do something loving instead of something easy. Risk our job to do what is right. Take a lower-paying job that matters more. Raise our children to serve rather than be served.

The Christmas story is about refusing to be part of the anger that surrounds us to love the people around us, to let go of jealousy and cynicism, and offer words of kindness. If Christmas is to be believed, God is with us, helping us love.

*sermon © Brett Younger*