

Least Known, Most Interesting: Joseph of Arimathea

Matthew 27:57-61

August 28, 2016

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

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Our final best supporting actor in this summer's sermon series is a man named Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph plays an important role in the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. He doesn't stay on the stage too long, but he shows up in each of the four gospels. From those accounts we can piece together the following picture:

From Luke's gospel, we learn that Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Jewish Council. This is the group of faith-leaders who asked Pontius Pilate to try him for treason. As a member of the council, Joseph would have been in the room for these deliberations. Luke's gospel tells us that though he was a member of this council, Joseph "had not agreed to their plan and action."

Mark makes it a point to note that Joseph of Arimathea was not just a member of the council, but also "respected." Mark also adds that Joseph was "waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God" when he asked Pilate for Jesus' body.

In John's gospel we find that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus – but under threat of living his faith out loud.

And in Matthew we hear that Joseph was rich.

In many ways, Joseph of Arimathea is what many of us are or want to be:

- He is a leader – someone who finds himself at the table around important decisions that face his community.
- He is respected – someone who seems to have earned that reputation from his peers because of his wisdom and life choices.
- He is a committed disciple of Jesus – a man who prioritizes his relationship with Christ even in situations where to do so might be difficult.
- And Joseph is financially secure – the Scripture says, "rich," presumably because Joseph has enough wealth to have his own tomb, which is an luxury not found among the working class of Jesus' day.

I have to admit that as I have been studying Joseph in preparation for this sermon, it is this last detail that has captivated me. It's not the

detail about Joseph that I think is most important – in fact I think it is the least important – but I have had a hard time reconciling Joseph’s socio-economic status with his status as a disciple of Jesus...in large part because of the tension that Jesus often suggests is at play between faith on the one hand and money on the other, a tension that we heard about in the passage that Erika read from Luke’s gospel.

I mean what do we do with these words from Jesus: “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Luke 18:24-25).

There’s a part of me that wonders if Joseph of Arimathea was there to hear Jesus say that. I wonder what Joseph thought? I wonder what Joseph felt? If he were there, Joseph clearly didn’t go and sell his possessions. That’s what Jesus asked the rich young ruler to do who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. And that’s the thing that the man couldn’t do – which prompted Jesus to talk about how difficult it is for people with wealth to enter the God’s kingdom.

And yet Matthew tells us that Joseph of Arimathea was rich and he was a disciple. And to give you a refresher in the players who were on the stage during Jesus’ trial, crucifixion and burial – beyond Joseph, there weren’t many other disciples to be found. With the exception of those loyal women, the other disciples – the ones whose names we know and celebrate – had deserted Jesus when he needed them most. But not Joseph. He was there – in life and in death, he was there.

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So how did Joseph do it? How did this camel thread the eye of the needle to become a disciple who played such a role in the resurrection of our Lord?

I think the Bible gives us two clues as to how Joseph did it.

First, as we learn in Mark’s gospel, Joseph waited expectantly for the kingdom of God. I know Jesus said that rich people had a hard time

entering the kingdom of God, but the text says that Joseph waited for it expectantly.

What Joseph did in asking for Jesus' body was dangerous. It took courage. It took courage because Jesus had just been crucified as an enemy of the state. He was considered to be an enemy of the state because he talked about the kingdom of God all the time – and not about the Kingdom of Rome, or the Kingdom of Israel. Joseph didn't just ask Pilate for a body – he asked Pilate for a body of a man convicted of treason...and, in so doing, Joseph identified himself as a follower of a treasonous criminal.

As a preacher friend of mine said, “You could wait for the kingdom of God and not be a follower of Jesus, but you can't be a follower of Jesus unless you are waiting for the kingdom. You could have courage and not wait for the kingdom, but you can't wait expectantly for the kingdom without courage.”¹

Think about that picture for a moment. Joseph holding the lifeless body of Jesus – carefully wrapped in a clean linen cloth – as he walks toward an open tomb. If ever there was a time to doubt whether God's kingdom would come, this would be it. Yet we hear that, even in this moment, Joseph was waiting expectantly for the kingdom – for God's way to triumph among us – for God's life to be claimed among us.

Tom Are, a Presbyterian pastor in Kansas notes the following: [Mark's gospel tells us that] “Joseph asked Pilate for Jesus' body. He asks for the soma of Jesus. Soma is the Greek word for body. But soma is a complicated word because it also means somebody. Soma is not just flesh; it's person. Joseph doesn't just ask for the body; Joseph asks for Jesus.

But Pilate gives Joseph the ptoma of Jesus. Ptoma is a different Greek word that means ‘carcass’ or ‘corpse.’ There's a world of difference in those words. Joseph asks for Jesus – Pilate grants him a carcass. “

¹ Are, Tom, Village Presbyterian Church (sermon from July 2105 on Joseph of Arimathea)

But that's what you do when you are waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. You believe past the place that most people stop that God will show up. You believe that the Spirit of God will bring healing in ways beyond your imagining. Even holding Jesus' dead body Joseph was waiting expectantly. I think that is the mark of a true disciple.

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The second way I think Joseph navigated his wealth with his commitment to follow Jesus is that he didn't let his stuff get in the way of his courage.

Sometimes that happens, you know. The things we accumulate, the things we enjoy – they actually become the reasons we fail to act in ways that we should. We grow afraid of speaking up because it might cost us our bonus; or we do a job we have grown to hate because it affords us a lifestyle that is just too hard to quit.

The Bible doesn't tell us what Joseph did to earn the title of being "a rich man from Arimathea," but what the Scripture does reveal is that having wealth didn't diminish the courage that it took to out himself as a disciple. In fact, what Joseph did was lead with his wealth, not use it to hide behind. He took the things he had worked hard to earn and he put them to use for a greater purpose.

I think about Millard and Linda Fuller who took the wealth they had accumulated and went to live on Koininia Farms in Americus, Georgia for a while. From there they started a Christian non-profit called Habitat for Humanity. Or about John Templeton – a Presbyterian elder whose philanthropic work has helped Princeton Seminary build a world-class endowment. There are plenty of examples of people with means who not only don't let their stuff get in the way of their commitment, but find ways to enhance their commitment to the faith with their stuff.

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The stories that move me in this regard, though, are not about famous people who have used their fabulous wealth to do amazing things. The stories that move me are yours.

I am moved when I get news that a bequest has come in to support our ministry to children from a person who volunteered countless hours in the programs of our church in decades past.

I am moved by those of you who have committed your energy to building relationships with our African-American sisters and brothers at First United Presbyterian Church – demonstrating your willingness to wait expectantly for the kingdom of God while working slowly and patiently to help us have more comfortable conversations about race.

I am moved by those of you whose hourly rate earns you more in a month than some people make in a year spending time every week tutoring a third grader in math.

I am moved by the families that make it a point to take their children to the Men's Shelter, or Mexico, or our sandwich kitchen.

How do we live in a world that pressures us to desire things like influence, respect, leadership, and financial security and balance that with Christ call to be a faithful disciple? Not perfectly. But maybe it is by waiting expectantly for God's will to be done – to trust that even when things seem to be adrift, God will answer the prayer we pray each Sunday: thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

And maybe the way we balance the pressures of the world with the demands of discipleship is by seeing the things we have as tools for ministry instead of trophies that secure our future. Because our stuff isn't what makes our future secure. Rather, it is Christ's promise.

We've spent the past nine weeks focused on the minor characters of the Bible – people, like Joseph of Arimathea, who don't spend a lot of time in the spotlight. We've spent this time – not just to increase your biblical literacy so you can impress your Southern Baptist friends, but to illustrate an important point: that the stories in this book aren't only about heroes and heroines of the faith who embody holiness and

practice perfect discipleship. There are far more characters in this book who are everyday people like you and me.

Our greatest mistake is not believing too much about ourselves as God's people. It is believing too little. It is allowing ourselves to think that God couldn't use someone as flawed/young/old/rich/conflicted/bruised/cynical/guilty/inadequate/scared as me to participate in the vision that Christ came to proclaim.

I hope you don't think that.

If you do – I hope you'll take the time to read these pages again. There's good news here – not only about God's plans for salvation...but for how you and I are called to help carry those plans out.

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