

July 28, 2013



## All in the Family 5: Joseph of Arimathea

Sermon by Rev. Robert English

*John 19:38-42*

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Today is the fifth Sunday in our summer sermon series 'All in the Family.' Each week Rev. Patricia has been focusing on lesser known followers of Jesus from the New Testament- lifting up for us today different models of discipleship.

Rev. Patricia mentioned before that she drew the name from the famous television show as the inspiration for the title of our summer sermon series.

Now I am from a different generation and have never seen an episode of 'All in the Family.' In fact I only know the television show by its name and the name of some of its iconic characters. But after some research and having heard Rev. Patricia's recap the show and its influence, I can more fully see how this show relates to the story of the Christian family.

Like the show, as far as I can see we are all one large, trying to be functional, family of God in Jesus Christ. We offer different gifts and shortcomings that contribute to the larger story of God's work in our world, all the time desiring to know Jesus and follow in his way.

And so this morning we hear the story of a lesser known disciple of Jesus named Joseph of Arimathea.

Before ever doing serious Bible study, I knew the name Joseph of Arimathea, due to the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, yes the Gospel According to Steven Spielberg. But how powerful is that art form that this movie made a lasting impression on me.

It was this movie which introduced me to the legend that grew over the centuries around Joseph of Arimathea, which linked his story all the way to the legend of King Arthur and his quest for the Holy Grail. The movie, although fiction, drew from legends that arose about Joseph of Arimathea and his role in the earliest history of the Christian movement.

In fact there are two legends that form over the years centered on Joseph of Arimathea. The first places Joseph of Arimathea as the first keeper of the Holy Grail. The Holy Grail is the cup which Jesus used in the meal that he shared with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. This legend grew from a poem by Robert De Boron entitled *Joseph of Arimathea* written in the early 13<sup>th</sup> Century.

The second legend that tends to be well known about Joseph of Arimathea is that Joseph was the first evangelist and pastoral leader in the British Isles. Christian lore says that Joseph made a journey to Glastonbury following the death of Jesus arriving in Britain around the middle of the first century. Both of these legends are linked and emerge around the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

These legends built and grew over time and as they sometimes have a tendency to do, overshadowed the scriptural stories that we have about the man Joseph of Arimathea.

Now let me say that both of these legends for which Joseph is most commonly known have nothing to do with the actually story of Jesus. In fact there is no scriptural evidence, nor other reliable historical evidence that

---

<sup>1</sup> The link between Joseph and the Church in England can be found in latter Protestant writers, including John Foxe who argues in part that the Church of England is independent from all other churches because it was established by Joseph of Arimathea.

places a man named Joseph of Arimathea in the British Isles or the keeper of the Holy Grail. In fact the Holy Grail itself is not mentioned in the Bible nor is there any scriptural evidence that the cup itself was important or significant.

And if you ask me, focusing on the cup as being special or important is missing the larger point, which is that it is **Jesus** who poured and pours himself out continually for the whole human family to bring healing and salvation- but I will try not to get too preachy.

I do not want to dismiss these stories too quickly because these are **legends** birthed in the religious and faithful imagination of the church family as they continued to weave together stories of heroes and heroines of the faith doing incredible and amazing things through the power of God's Holy Spirit.

But taken for anything beyond that can really muddy the waters for us as modern faithful Christians especially in our contemporary context where people both outside and inside the church know very little of the Bible itself and sometimes equate Christian legend with Scriptural truth.

To me what is more important than the legend that built up around Joseph of Arimathea is the model of discipleship Joseph gives us through the actual stories of scripture. The short story that we heard this morning along with the other stories of him in the Gospels, give us a picture of discipleship which should be uplifted as a model for each of us.

For whatever reason in my mind, I picture Joseph of Arimathea as an Uncle in our church family. I think that I picture him in this way because he was in all likelihood an older man, well established in his life and status. But also I think of him as an uncle because of the spiritual maturity that he exhibited, the reverence and honor with which he treated the body of Jesus, and his bold actions in the face of fear and oppression. All of these attributes I see as the best of what an Uncle can offer to a family.

Let's take a moment to see our Uncle Joseph through the stories from the Gospels. First, it is pretty remarkable that Joseph appears in all four of the Gospels, in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Not only does he appear in each Gospel, but also he appears in a very similar way in each story. In each of the gospel accounts it is Joseph who requests and buries the body of Jesus following the crucifixion. Now, in each of the gospels he is portrayed slightly different way. In Matthew he is a wealthy disciple of Jesus, in Mark and Luke he is a member of the religious authority who goes against that authority because believed in Jesus and in the reign of God, and in John, the scripture passage that we heard this morning we hear that Joseph is a disciple of Jesus, but one who lived in secret, until the moment of Jesus' death.

What stands out most in Joseph's story is what often times stands out in our own stories, that moment when you let go of fear in order to honor Jesus with your life.

Joseph of Arimathea was a man who had a lot to lose in following Jesus. He stood out in contrast to the better known disciples because he was not a poor or marginalized person. He was not a fisherman or tax collector, professions that were not honored or respected by society.

The scripture tells us that he was wealthy and often times a member of the religious elite who opposed Jesus. These factors in his story lead me to at least empathize and understand why he was a secret follower of Jesus during Jesus' life and ministry. Following Jesus would have meant risking a lot. And so, according to the story from John, Joseph followed Jesus in secret.

It might be easy to dismiss Joseph of Arimathea as a person with a weak backbone, a coward, someone who really cared more for his status and wealth than following Jesus.

But I do wonder how many of us have had moments to where we have been paralyzed by fear and missed out on the chance to follow Jesus?

I know in my life there have been many moments when following Jesus meant going against the crowd, it meant losing a bit of my own social status or ego- and instead of embracing those moments I chose to fade into the background, to follow Jesus in secret.

What is more incredible about Joseph's story is that there is this powerful grace in it which calls and speaks to those of us who have at times followed Jesus in secret.

Joseph of Arimathea, empowered by the Holy Spirit, acted boldly at a time when others had abandoned Jesus out of fear. The other disciples who followed Jesus publicly during his life abandoned Jesus at his death. One by one they scattered as Jesus was arrested, sentenced and put to death. I do not blame them for giving into that fear that can overcome us as we look at oppression and suffering face to face.

But what is incredible about the gospel story is that it is again this unlikely person, who filled with grace and love for Jesus emerges. It is Joseph who comes out of hiding, acts boldly and honors Jesus with his life. Joseph goes to Pilate, requesting the body of this man seen by the state as a criminal. This is about as public a confession of faith as one can make.

When the other disciples retreat in order to follow Jesus in secret, Joseph comes forward boldly as a follower of Christ. I can only imagine the thing that drives him forward into such an act is the power of love and faith. It is love and faith for Jesus that leads him to this public confession; it is love that trumps fear and faith that brings him out of hiding into the light.

And so in a real and literal sense the death Jesus brought salvation to Joseph of Arimathea. It was the death of Jesus which freed Joseph from the bondage of fear to societal norms and the powers of the world. It was Jesus' death that brought Joseph into freedom and love. It is Joseph who experiences the power of the Holy Spirit and is led to act on behalf of love, caring for the body of his savior.

What Joseph reminds me and us all is that there is not one path of discipleship. There is not one formula that we can plug into our lives which will equate to the perfect way to follow Jesus. We are human beings; living beautifully messy lives striving follow Jesus, the Lord of Life. This morning we welcomed our newest sister in the faith Esther Antonia. Along with her parents and family we the church renewed our vows as follower of Jesus to do our best to follow his way no matter what. We said that we will try our hardest to be a functional family of Jesus Christ not for our own sakes but for his sake and for the world which he loves so deeply.

As we honor the life and discipleship of our Uncle Joseph of Arimathea we remember that we are all called at unlikely times because we are unlikely candidates. But nevertheless we are called to shake the bonds of fear, to act boldly in love and grace and to honor Jesus with our lives.

*© Rev. Robert English, 2013. Permission is given for brief quotation with attribution. All other rights reserved.*

First United Methodist Church  
1008 Eleventh Street  
Santa Monica, CA 90403  
[www.santamonicaumc.org](http://www.santamonicaumc.org)  
310-393-8258