

Our lives are made up of a series of countless choices, most of which go by unnoticed, and the sum of those choices is our life. Those choices are who we are and how we will be remembered. How will this generation be remembered, as those who chose courage or cowardice? From generation to generation, there are people in our lives who've chosen a better way. I wonder who those people are for you. Grandpa Schultz was someone who showed me what it means to choose a better way. He was a righteous man who knew loss and suffering yet managed to live a beautiful life. He and Grandma had five children, my mother as the third sandwiched between four boys. The two older boys died before I was born, one of a brain tumor, and the other in a military helicopter accident. A decade later, just as he was getting ready to retire, my grandma had a major stroke, upending all of their retirement plans. Instead of living in the woods of Arkansas, they moved near us in Ohio, and he became her fulltime caretaker, taking over the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and transporting Grandma wherever they went. My adolescence is filled with memories of Grandpa setting up portable ramps to get Grandma into our home, so we could eat together as a family every week. In so many ways, his life did not turn out the way he hoped. He could easily have chosen the path of bitterness and anger, yet he lived a life of faithfulness and hope. We can choose a better way.

After reporting an unlikely genealogy that includes five women who no one would expect belong in a royal family tree, Matthew gives us his version the annunciation, told from Joseph's perspective. We know precious little about Joseph. Tradition says that he was an older man, but the Bible says nothing of this. Joseph may well have been a young man. Josephus said that 18 was the ideal age for a Jewish man to marry. Perhaps he was around that age, but the truth is we don't know. What we do know is that he's engaged and finds out that Mary is pregnant, and he resolves to end their engagement quietly, because he didn't want to humiliate her. For this reason, Matthew says Joseph is a righteous man.

This is really interesting. Joseph is a righteous man, a just man, because he refused to humiliate Mary. What's fascinating is that Joseph's Bible instructed him to do more than humiliate her. Deuteronomy 22 outlines what to do when an engaged woman is found to have been intimate with a man other than her betrothed. **Deuteronomy 22:24 says, "You must bring both of them to the city gates there and stone them until they die. Remove such evil from your community!"** Now in Mary's case, you could only stone her since there was no man to be found, but it's not hard to imagine Joseph pursuing a punitive path with Mary, and justifying his actions based on scripture. After all, Deuteronomy is black and white. The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it. Instead, he chooses a better way, a more compassionate way, one that may have put him at odds with his own community and his Bible. He decides to not obey Deuteronomy, which is what makes Joseph righteous.

Here we have a story in the Bible of a man who doesn't obey the Bible, and the Bible calls him righteous for doing so. Incredible, isn't it? You see, the Bible, like life itself, isn't simple. To be faithful takes wisdom and compassion, not simple obedience. Joseph's willingness to live in the gray, not in the black and white, his decision to err on the side of compassion, that is what makes him righteous. It turns out, God is not looking for people who blindly stand for the truth. God is looking for people who choose life over laws and compassion over judgment. That was true 2000 years ago, and it's still true today. **[Title Slide]** We can choose a better way.

Our lives are full of choices about how we treat other people. Will we choose compassion or judgment? I don't think we can do both. Jesus' life and ministry demonstrates again and again that mercy triumphs over judgment, and maybe, just maybe Jesus learned that from his adoptive father, Joseph. So, let's get real for a moment. As children, many of us were taught black and white rules about marriage and sexuality, that marriage is between one man and one woman, for life. We were told that's what the Bible says, and anyone who steps out of the black and white and into the gray is foolish at best and evil at worst. When it comes to the LGBTQ community, we were taught to choose judgement, weren't we? My friends, we can choose a better way, where we put people above principles and compassion over judgement. I know it can be scary. It can feel like we are going against our upbringing or even against God. But what Joseph shows us and what Jesus will learn from him is that when we choose mercy over judgment, we are always choosing the better way.

Compassion is the better way, but we need more than just compassion. Had Joseph simply showed compassion, Mary would have lived, but Jesus would never have had a father. Joseph needed courage as well. **[Painting of The Courageous Choice]** To get there, God had to intervene through a dream. Joseph, like his Old Testament namesake who wore a coat of many colors, is a dreamer. In the first two chapters of Matthew, Joseph has four dreams that he believes are from God, and he listens to all of them. Now, I haven't heard many sermons in which I was told to trust that my dreams are from God. Have you? Disney has taught me that, but not the church. I think the reason we are hesitant to trust our dreams is because we've been trained to mistrust ourselves. Most Christians are taught to trust the Bible for guidance, but do not look inward. Yet had Joseph done that, Mary, and the Christ child she carried, might have been stoned. Joseph had the audacity to believe that his deepest self was good and therefore can be trusted. This is perhaps the most courageous thing any of us can ever do, to trust that our core self is good, that our hearts are good.

Joseph learns to trust both his heart and Mary's, and that took great courage and vulnerability. By staying with Mary and raising Jesus as his own, Joseph makes himself vulnerable to the constant whispers that will follow them for the rest of their lives. In addition, Joseph made himself vulnerable to a powerful, murderous, narcissistic King Herod. That's what Joseph stood to lose by staying with Mary—everything. This was the cost of choosing a better way. Was it worth it? Oh yes. Oh yes, it was worth it, to him, to Mary and Jesus, to all of us. Without Joseph's courage, we wouldn't be here now. The cost of love is courage and vulnerability. And the reward of love is everything that matters to us. It reverberates in ways we will never know.

Grandpa Schultz chose a better way. He didn't become bitter or resentful that his life hadn't turned out the way he imagined, but instead learned to cook, to clean, and to care for his wife in their retirement. Those small acts of faithfulness added up to a beautiful life, and his choices still reverberate in me from the grave. Our lives are a series of choices, most of which go by unnoticed, and the sum of those choices is how we will be remembered. Every day we are given a million opportunities to choose the better way but so often we don't. Too often we don't choose the better way but choose the path of least resistance. Too often we've chosen not to listen to voices on the margins, those pleading for compassion, only to be met with our indifference. While our choices do matter, the good news of the gospel is that God's choice of us is what matters most. In the end, your choices, though important, are not the final word, and

thank God for that. The story of Christmas is the story of a God who choose the way of compassion and courage and vulnerability for our sake, a God who took on flesh, who put relationships over rules, mercy over judgment, not just once or twice but again and again, forever more, all so that God might be near to us.

Beloved, God has chosen to risk everything to be near to you, so that in all your choices, both the cowardly and the courageous, you might know that you are loved with an everlasting love, and there is nothing that God will not do, nothing that God will not risk, just to be near to you. That's the story of Christmas, and it is the best news any of us have ever heard.