

EXTREMIST LOVE

Matthew 1: 18-25

Kia Scherr, her husband Alan and their children were part of a spiritual community called the synchronicity foundation. Although they would consider themselves Christians, they found the typical church experience stale and lifeless. Synchronicity combined the best from various religious traditions. The community's rituals and practices focussed on mindfulness meditation and prayer toward inner fulfillment, peace and simplicity of life.

In 2008, members of the community gathered for a retreat in Mumbai, India, in order to draw on the riches of Hindu traditions. Alan and daughter Naomi were on this trip while Kia used the time to visit family in Florida. But something happened on November 26, 2008, that would forever change Kia's world – A terrorist attack. In fact, there were 12 coordinated attacks across Mumbai, and by the end, 164 people were dead. Among the casualties were Alan and Naomi. Kia got a call. She couldn't believe it! Both of them, murdered, just like that! Numbed shock came over her... She needed to be with her family... Together they watched the news coverage while waiting for more information... And there, on CNN, she saw the face of the lone surviving terrorist. He was a young man about the same age as her sons. Outrage and anger were the reaction of family members. 'Make him suffer' was their response.

For Kia, though, something else arose from depths in her heart and soul she had never anticipated... Words came to her, words uttered by Jesus from the cross: Forgive them, for they know not what they do." What we need, she thought, was not more hate against the hate. What we need is even greater love and compassion to meet that kind of hate. Her family thought she had gone mad. What about Alan and Naomi?! But Kia couldn't help what her heart was telling her. And then, as calls and notes came in full of compassion and love, an outpouring of it, Kia wanted to understand what all this love was about. How could she find healing? How could she find something of meaning and purpose to latch onto and pull her way out of the pit that could easily swallow her whole? Would she be held hostage by more anger, hate and revenge because she was a victim of extreme acts of anger, hate and revenge? Or would something totally different and even more powerful drive her?

Before I continue with Kia's story, Let's ponder our gospel reading for this Christmas eve. We can get so used to reading the Christmas story as a sweet, sentimental love story. But when we do this, we miss the radical nature of the love in the story. Why? Because if we absorb the story for what it's saying, it will challenge us down to the core of our being. Who wants to be challenged like that at Christmas?! Well, I'm sorry to tell you but here at Armour Heights, we're into truth-telling. We're into truth-telling because we believe that divine

transformation can only happen when we are confronted by truth. Let's see what can happen when we re-read this old story with a commitment to truth.

Matthew's account tells the story from the perspective of Joseph. The society Mary and Joseph live in is bound by strict moral rules. Break those rules and you are banished. Break those rules and you are rejected and condemned. If you're poor and dependent on the network of family and community relationships in order to make it, being rejected is like a death sentence. There's a lot of pressure to live within the rules. So, what are the rules? For a young woman after puberty, the future must be marriage to a man, and the man must be chosen by the family. Families negotiate and the marriage must be good not only for the family, but for the community. Dishonour and shame are things everyone wants to avoid.

The marriage itself is also a highly prescribed process. The couple are engaged for a year ahead of the marriage and they don't live together. Only after the year passes do they marry officially and then work on having children. Anything outside of these rules will bring dishonour and shame to the family and rejection to the couple.

So now, think about Mary and Joseph in our story. Mary is pregnant. They are engaged but have never lived together. How did Mary get pregnant? And don't tell me some divine source is at play because no one would believe that. Would you? If you were told the pregnancy was divinely sourced, would you believe it? Or would you think someone came up with that after too much drink or drugs, or more likely fear of revealing the real truth?

So, what could have happened to Mary then? Whatever anyone else may think, Joseph knows he's not the father. So, did Mary have an affair? In her world? A peasant teenager? Not likely. The more likely explanation is that she was violated somehow. No one's talking. But Joseph finds out. So, what's he supposed to do? This is before he has any dream or anything like that. What's Joseph supposed to do? He can cut his losses, blame Mary and move on. He can point the finger at her and reclaim his pride. Marry someone else. Forget about Mary. But here's what Joseph actually does: We're told he is a 'righteous' man, and righteous doesn't mean he is a strict follower of rules regardless of the consequences on the human being involved. No. His righteousness is not about reclaiming his honour and condemning Mary. No. Joseph's righteousness is about real love and genuine care. We're told that he was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, and so, he planned to dismiss her quietly. I mean dismissing her was something he had to do, no? The child is not his, after all. His righteousness is his graciousness and love in that he wants to let her go as quietly as possible so that Mary can disappear into her family and into life with minimum shame and dishonour. There would be a little stain on Joseph's honour, but hopefully, he could start again without much sticking to him. That's what love would do no? And that's plenty, no?

No! Something else happened to Joseph that would totally transform not only his life and that of Mary, but the world too. It all begins with a dream. Joseph dreams that the child in Mary is no ordinary child. This child is special. In fact, this child is of the Holy Spirit. This child will become the means of bringing healing and wholeness – salvation – to all people who open their hearts to his love. There's a lot of trouble in the world (sin is what the bible calls it). There's a lot of pain and suffering too. Living by strict moral rules is not enough to deal with all that, and in fact, rules often get in the way. What is needed in a world full of anger, hate, pain and hopelessness is the kind of love that can meet all that head on. If the bad in the world is extreme, the love rising to meet it must be even more extreme. By breaking all the rules and by embracing this child and Mary, Joseph is crossing all social boundaries in the name of love. Joseph's love is extremist. His choice, at great cost to himself, will change the world. But first, he must believe? Who could believe a wild dream? Would you?

Now, back to Kia. Kia decided that she had to leave Synchronicity - her spiritual community - because it was far too insular. The focus on a person's inner world without the recognition of how inner world and the world outside are totally connected was far too limited. Mindfulness Meditation was about me in myself without thought to how the outside world and my personhood are totally interconnected. How can I find inner fulfillment and peace if I am not also engaged meaningfully and spiritually with the world around me?

Soon after the terrible loss of Alan and Naomi, the news reports showed the trial of the lone young terrorist. He was found guilty and executed. Kia was devastated. What a lost opportunity. In order to meet the kind of anger, hate, pain and hopelessness in our world today, what was needed, she felt, was the kind of love that not only forgave by letting go. No. Forgiveness came to mean something even more for Kia. Forgiveness is "for giving." Extreme hate must be met by even more extreme love. Radical acts of violence had to be met by even more radical giving of kindness and grace. Rather than execution, this lone terrorist should have been engaged by an even more extremist love. That's what the world needs to see and learn in order to be saved.

And so, Kia left her insular spiritual community and founded "One Life Alliance." Let me read the purpose of One Life Alliance as found on their website: [Our purpose is to inspire and encourage the conversation about oneness and the dignity of life. We do this by collaborating with businesses, governments, organizations and schools. But it starts with each one of us.](#)

[We believe that to counter-balance terrorism in all forms requires people of all ages and backgrounds to understand that all life is to be respected. From the poorest and most remote villages of developing countries to the busy highways in our cities, we share a](#)

common intention – to honor life in ourselves and in each other regardless of race, religion, gender or age.

Our key message is that life is to be honored because it is life itself that we all share. It is the simple truth that far too many people today are influenced by a prevailing negative regard for human life, including their own. When we honor the dignity of life, we are living with peace, compassion and forgiveness.

Extreme times as we are living in today, require even more extreme commitments to love and justice. Extreme times as we are living today require individuals committed to relationships of giving and community building. In a world full of anger, hate, pain and hopelessness, what can you and I be inspired to grow into more fully in order to really find our heart and soul? In the face of extremist terror and staggering personal loss, Kia Scherr reconnected with her faith and established an organization that focusses on personal fulfillment and peace through concrete commitments to love in the world. In the face of a restrictive, authoritarian society bound by extreme rules, a young Joseph opened his heart to believe a dream that would change his life and the world. Love would win even if it cost him everything. Our world needs such commitments to love if we are to have a future.

So, what about you and me? If the Christmas story is going to mean anything for us this Christmas, it must engage our personal lives and circumstances somehow. What needs to change and what can change for you and me? What are your dreams? Where do you find your inspiration? May this Christmas become a time of new discovery and new commitments for you. Amen.