

The Women of the Genealogy: Tamar

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 1:1-17

We are entering the season of Advent, a season where we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus. This year, to get our heart ready for Jesus, we will spend the next four weeks looking at the 4 women of Matthew's genealogy. As most of you know, in his first chapter, Matthew traces Jesus' family tree; as part of that tree, he lists 4 women from the Old Testament, 4 women with very interesting stories – all of whom are part of Jesus' family.

Just the fact that Matthew included women in his genealogy is unusual. In Matthew's day, women weren't part of genealogies. Genealogies were all men. So and so was the son of so and so who was the son of so and so, and so on. On the rare occasions that women were included in a genealogy, it was only because they were women of prestige and fame and good breeding whose stories enhanced the family name. Which shows the general idea behind genealogies in those days. They were meant to shine up the family reputation.

I'll let you decide if today's character and her story enhances the family name. The first woman of Matthew's genealogy is Tamar. Not the Tamar you heard about in the David stories, the sister of Solomon who was abused by Amnon. No, this Tamar goes further back to the time of Jacob and his sons. This Tamar was a daughter-in-law of Judah, Jacob's son. I will read the genealogy now and then I'll tell her story and you can decide if Tamar and the story that surrounds her enhances the family name. Read Matthew 1:1-17

"Judah, the Father of Perez, whose mother was Tamar." There she is, the first of the four women of the genealogy. Tamar. You can find her story in Genesis 38, and maybe you wonder, 'Peter, why didn't you read Genesis 38 so you could hear the story directly.' I'll tell you why: because it's R-rated. As it's written in the Bible the story of Tamar is just a little too spicy for young ears, so I will retell the story in an edited, pg-13 version.

Tamar was a Canaanite woman who became Judah's daughter-in-law. She was given in marriage to Judah's oldest son, Er. Judah had moved to the region of Canaan, away from his family. He had three sons with a Canaanite woman, and when his oldest came of age, he finds her a Canaanite bride: Tamar. Unfortunately, Er dies early in the marriage, before the couple have any children.

Now, in the ancient world, when that happened a process called Levirate marriage kicked in. In Levirate marriage, if a son dies without an heir, one of the brothers has a duty to provide an heir, not to marry the widow necessarily, but to impregnate her so that she could have children. It's a strange practice to our ears, but it was common in that time and place and it was meant to help the widow. In those days a widowed woman needed a child to care for her in her old age. Without a child, she would be destitute. The duty to provide an heir falls to Jacob's second son, a man named Onan. Onan however refuses to do his duty. He treats Tamar very badly: he uses her for pleasure but takes steps to avoid giving her a child which was doubly cruel to Tamar. The Lord punishes him for his action and he dies.

Now there is only one brother left, but two of them are now dead. Judah knows he still has an obligation to give his youngest son to Tamar, but he says, "Forget this! I'm not letting my youngest son near this woman!" (He unjustly blames Tamar for his sons' death.) Judah sends Tamar away to live as a widow in her Father's house in the town of Timnah more than ten miles away. He fails to do what is right. He washes his hands of her and leaves her destitute.

That's when things get interesting. Years later Tamar finds out that Judah is coming to Timnah on business. Tamar hatches a plan. She takes off her widows clothing and she dresses up like a prostitute; she wears something more colorful and alluring, including a veil that covers her face, and then she plants herself outside the city gate where she knows Judah will be passing by. Apparently she knows Judah's character well enough to believe he will proposition her when he sees her.

Judah arrives at the city, sees her there and, not realizing that it's his daughter-in-law, immediately and crudely propositions her. Once again, more bad behavior, embarrassingly bad behavior, by one of the Patriarchs. "What will you pay me," she asks Judah. "I'll give you a goat from my flock," he said. "Well I don't see a goat with you, so what will you give me as collateral until I actually get payment." "What do you want?" asks Judah. "How about you give me your seal, your cord and your staff," she said. That's the ancient equivalent of asking for his credit card and personal id. It's way too much, but Judah is so carried along by his lust that he gives it to her. They transact their business without Judah ever recognizing her, and Judah goes on his way.

Later Judah has a friend come to bring the goat so he can get his seal and his staff back, but she's nowhere to be found. His friend asks around, "Where's the prostitute who used to hang out by the city gate?" The people of Timnah shrug their shoulders and say, "There's no prostitute by the city gate." Embarrassed, Judah decides to keep the goat and forget about the whole thing. What he doesn't know is that Tamar is pregnant because of him.

3 months later someone tells him, "Judah, did you hear the news? Do you remember your daughter-in-law Tamar? The one you sent to Timnah? She's pregnant. Rumor has it she's been prostituting herself!" Judah is outraged. "Burn her!" he says, "Go find her and we'll burn her!" More than a little hypocritical on his part. The men go out, they seize her, and they take her to the place where she will be burned, only at the moment the fire is about to be kindled, she pulls out Judah's seal and Judah's staff and says, "I am pregnant by the man who owns these!" She holds them up and everyone can see that this is Judah's seal and Judah's staff.

It's a David-Nathan moment. "You are the man!" Throughout this story, Judah's behavior has been appalling, but here for the first time he does the right thing. He admits everything and he confesses, "Tamar is telling the truth and she is more righteous than me."

They let Tamar go. It turns out she is not only pregnant; she's pregnant with twins. She gives birth to two sons: One she names Zerah and the other she named Perez. You'll recognize Perez. He's mentioned in Matthew's genealogy. Turns out the line of Jesus does not pass through any of Judah's "regular" sons. The line of our Lord passes through Tamar and Perez and this sordid story.

So the Holy Spirit, through Matthew, puts the name of Tamar in the genealogy of our Lord. Does her story add to the family's prominence and reputation? No. It doesn't. This is an embarrassing story. This is the kind of story families try to hide. This is the kind of story that becomes a family secret. And it would have been very easy for Matthew to de-emphasize this story. He could have just said, "Jacob was the Father of Judah who was the Father of Perez who was the Father of Hezron." He could have just stuck to the men like all the other genealogies and the story would be buried. But the Holy Spirit inspires Matthew to mention Tamar! Why!?

There's a deliberate strategy here. Many scholars have noted that the four women of Jesus' genealogy form an interesting contrast to the 4 matriarchs of Judaism. In Jewish practice, still today, there are four women who are revered as the ancestral matriarchs. Those are Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. Go home and google the 4 matriarchs and you will see that they are still revered as pillars of Jewish faith. Here's a brief quote from a contemporary website: "The designation of the 4 matriarchs is not based strictly on ancestry, but on prominence. It was these four great women who formed the spiritual base on which our nation was built."

Can you hear the spirit of that quote? The matriarchs are considered 4 great women. They are spiritual pillars. They are a source of pride! Together with the great patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they are examples for us to follow. Their names do add dignity and weight to the family tree. They are exemplars. When you tell the stories of the 4 matriarchs and the 4 patriarchs the subtext is: be like them! When genealogies are constructed like that, the message you receive is: "If you are going to be part of this family, you better prove yourself. You better show something. We have high standards here. We are a family of standing"

The four women of Matthew's genealogy send off a very different message; a very different vibe. This story isn't a source of spiritual pride for future generations; this story would be a source of spiritual shame.

How does that change the vibe of the genealogy? Well, if you are a broken person, this family suddenly doesn't seem so inaccessible anymore. Maybe you're a person who struggles with addiction, maybe you're a person who's always been on the outside of things, maybe you're a person who has a moral failure in your life, something so bad that you think: 'if people knew that about me, they wouldn't want me around.' But read the genealogy of this family, read the story of Tamar and Judah and you might think, "Hmm. Maybe there's room here for me. Maybe there's hope in this family for a person like me."

There are places in this world where it's appropriate to lead with our strengths and point to our accomplishments. If you are at a job interview, you don't tell them your failures; you dress up nice and sell yourself. If you are trying out for a team, you don't tell the coach all your weaknesses; I can't do a left handed layup and my defense is only so-so, no you show the coach your best. But trying to make a basketball team or trying to get a job is not the same as trying to become a fully alive human being. You can bury your weakness your fear and your shame during the job interview, but if you want to live a life of joy, if you want to love people well and live in meaningful relationships with people, you will need to deal with your failures, your sins, your brokenness, your stories of shame.

By including Tamar's story in the genealogy, it's like the Holy Spirit telling us: Jesus isn't coming to this world to do a series of righteousness tryouts where everyone who lives up to the standards of the patriarchs and matriarchs makes the team and everyone else is cut. No, Jesus is coming for our shame. Jesus is coming for people who have shameful stories like Tamar's. Jesus is coming so that the worst of sinners will have a chance at a new life. Paul understood: "Here is a trustworthy saying worthy of full acceptance: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the very worst." Jesus came for your worst moments. Jesus starts with your worst moments. That place where you utterly failed, that place of complete humiliation, on the cross Jesus meets you in that place and he says, "Don't worry I still love you. I'm here to save you. Take my hand and you can start again."

I was thinking about the Spirit of Matthew's genealogy compared to the other success and accomplishment centered genealogies this week, and I found myself thinking of the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island. You know the Grand Hotel? Some of you have stayed there. It's a beautiful place. The Grand Hotel also has standards. If you visit, after 6:30 pm men are expected to wear ties and jackets while the women are expected to wear dresses or dress slacks. Don't show up for your 7 pm reservation in yoga pants and a hoodie. They also don't let just anyone in the door. One time when we were visiting the island, Linda and I wandered up onto the porch hoping to walk around inside just to see the place. A man in a red blazer politely asked us if we were guests at the hotel. We shook our head and slunk away. It's fine that the Grand Hotel has those standards. They're a private business and it adds to its mystique.

But when Jesus came to the world, he didn't come to a place like the Grand Hotel. Which is good, because if he did, many of us might wonder if we were worthy to come in. Jesus didn't come to the Grand Hotel, he came to a stable, and there's no one with a red jacket watching the door of the stable. The stable door is open to everyone: cows, sheep, shepherds, prostitutes, beggars, street people, Tamar and Judah, gay and straight, screw-ups and failures, Me and You. All are welcome through the stable door.

Of course once you enter that door, and you fall on your knees before the child in the manger, watch out! Because he'll get a hold of your life. He doesn't want to leave us in our shame and our sin, he wants to raise us up to new life. And sometimes the path to that new life might not be so easy. But the end of that path is beautiful. The end of that path is everlasting joy. The path to that life starts here at the stable, and it's open to absolutely everyone. So, let every heart prepare him room.

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