

The Ballad of the Begats
A Sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss
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At the end of a workshop Makaanah and I attended in Hawaii this last summer, we participated in a Kava ceremony, led by a Hawaiian Kahuna. As part of the ceremony, we stated our names, and then listed those from whom we are descended. While most of us could go back a couple of generations, it is not uncommon for a Hawaiian to be able to recite many generations, a trait which had a very practical application in ancient Polynesian culture.

As the Polynesian people traveled from island to island by boat, often needing to re-supply their vessels from an island that was already inhabited, they would introduce themselves to the inhabitants of the island by saying who they were, and from whom they were descended. The current residents of the island would listen to this recitation, sometimes going back 10, 15, or 20 generations until they heard a name that they recognized as part of their own lineage. At that point the visitors would be welcomed ashore as the relatives that they in fact were – for we know that if we go back far enough – we are indeed all related.

I'll have to admit that I had never given much thought to the practical applications of being able to recite one's genealogy. I know that it would be useful if I actually wanted to join the Sons of the Confederacy, or if my daughter Sara wanted to join the Daughters of the American Revolution, but somehow being able to mention that Patrick Henry was a first cousin (albeit 5-6 generations removed) seems more like pretentious name dropping than something I would hold in my consciousness and take up that limited brain space I seem to have left available for long term memory.

Similarly, the seemingly endless lists of who fathered whom, that occur throughout the Jewish and Christian scriptures had always seemed to me to be one of the prime reasons relatively few people accurately claim to have read the whole Bible. And then this last summer at General Assembly, I got a copy of Harvey Cox's book *When Jesus Came to Harvard, Making Moral Choices Today*, which is a taken from the very popular course he taught at Harvard for 15 years. The book does an excellent job of portraying Jesus as the rabbinical teacher that he was – one who usually answered questions put to him with either a parable or a question rather than with an authoritative answer. And even as Cox reminds us that Jesus' primary method of instruction was to get his listeners to think for themselves in a spiritual context, he also includes a fascinating chapter that he called the Ballad of the Begats, in which he reminds us of how the early church positioned Jesus as a teacher.

In this advent season within the Christian calendar, in which we hear so often the stories that are told about Jesus' birth, I thought it might be interesting to consider a different perspective on how Jesus' birth was portrayed based on the stories associated with the lineage which is presented in the

first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

The gospel of Matthew begins as follows: Chapter I vs.1. “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” This verse establishes Jesus as descended from both Abraham and David, establishing his credentials as a Jew with a kingly heritage. And then begins the recitation of the 14 generations from Abraham to David, and the 14 from David to the deportation, and the 14 from the deportation to Jesus. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and

But wait a minute, why is the woman Tamar mentioned in the tracing of a genealogy by who fathered whom? Well, if one goes back to the 38th chapter of Genesis, it turns out that the story of Tamar is a very interesting one. It seems that Judah married a Canaanite woman and with her had three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. As they grew up, Judah selected a wife for Er, whose name was Tamar. But, as the story goes, Er was wicked in the sight of the Lord and so the Lord slew him. Now according to Jewish law, if a widow was left childless, it was the obligation of the brother of her husband to get her pregnant so that she might raise up offspring for his brother that his brother’s name and heritage might not perish from the earth. And so Judah ordered Onan to do his duty. Unfortunately, Onan did not like the idea of furthering his brother’s line instead of his own, and so he tried to cheat the process by spilling his seed upon the ground, which displeased the Lord, so the Lord slew him also.

At this point Judah got nervous. He only had one son left, and Tamar’s track record wasn’t looking too good, so he sent her to live with her Father, promising that when Shelah grew up he would send him to perform his brotherly duty. After a few years in which time Judah’s wife died, and Shelah came of age, but during which time Tamar had not been treated according to the custom, Tamar became impatient. Hearing that Judah would be passing her way to visit his sheepshearers, she disguised herself as a harlot, and took up a position by the side of the road down which Judah would be traveling. Noticing her, but not recognizing her because of her veiled face, Judah decides to pay her a visit and bargains with her for a kid from the flock as payment. She agrees, but insists that he leave his signet and cord, and his staff with her as a pledge until she receives her payment. Tamar conceives by Judah, and having gotten the payment she really wanted, she goes her way, takes off her veil, and again puts on the garments of her widowhood ... and waits.

When Judah tries to send his payment for her services, no one can find nor have they ever heard of the harlot he is seeking and so Judah decides he has done his best, and will just let her keep his staff and signet. But then in about three months, Judah gets word that his daughter in law has played the harlot, and become pregnant as a result. Offended, Judah orders that she be brought out that she may be burned for her transgression, but she presents him with the staff and signet and cord, explaining that it is by the man to whom these belong that she is with child. Then Judah acknowledges that Tamar is more righteous than he had been in that he had failed to give her to his son Shelah.

Tamar bears twins, one of whom is counted in the lineage of Jesus.

Now it is an interesting enough story, but what relevance does it have for the early church? Well, it would seem that by calling attention to the narrative, which Matthew does by invoking the name of Tamar instead of just mentioning Perez as the father in the lineage, Matthew is making a particular point. He is saying that Jesus is descended from a Canaanite woman who did not passively suffer injustice in a male dominated system, but who was willing to take her fate into her own hands even if it meant pretending to be a harlot in order to secure her right to the children who would establish her place in the social order of the time.

The next of the four women mentioned in this line is Rahab, described in rabbinical lore as one of the four most beautiful women in the world. Unlike Tamar, who pretended to be a harlot, Rahab actually was one and, according to the story, she plied her trade in a boudoir located in the wall of the city of Jericho. When Joshua, who was leading the people of Israel who had left Egypt into “the promised land,” sent spies into Jericho to determine how best to take the city, Rahab hid them when agents of the king of Jericho came looking for them. Having heard of “the greatness of their God,” Rahab decided to cast her lot with the Israelites, and having made a deal with the spies to protect both herself and all the members of her household when they were victorious over the inhabitants of Jericho, she sent the king's agents off on a false lead, and later lowered the spies down a rope out of the wall of the city so that they could hide and escape detection. When the city fell, Rahab and her family were spared, and she went on to be counted as the ancestress not only of David and Jesus, but of Jeremiah and seven other prophets.

Again one might ask, why is her name mentioned in the recitation of Jesus' lineage? Certainly by doing so, Mathew ties Jesus to the prophetic tradition and those other prophets who claimed her as an ancestress. He also is pointing out that those who are counted as part of the scheme of salvation are not necessarily well-behaved folks, or those who would naturally be counted as among the chosen people, but can include any – regardless of their previous behavior, who choose to cast their lot with the followers of the way.

The next woman mentioned by Mathew is Ruth. Again it is worth noting that Ruth is a Moabite, who comes into the Hebraic lineage by virtue of her remarkable love for Naomi. Having spent some time with the story of Ruth in a sermon a couple of weeks ago, I won't dwell on it now other than to say that once again, we have the story of a woman who does not fit the mold of the typical acculturated Hebraic wife. Ruth is someone who takes her destiny in her own hands and is considered righteous primarily by how faithful she is to the spirit of love as she has come to experience and understand it. Her faithfulness to her understanding of love is what gets her counted as worthy of mention in an otherwise male lineage.

The last woman referred to by Matthew is not named directly though we all know who she is.

Mathew lists the chronology this way: Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah... . The fact that Bathsheba is not named in the genealogy probably means that it is not here actions that are of note, but David's behavior with her, particularly since she is described as the wife of Uriah. For those of you who haven't read the story lately, let me encapsulate it for you.

One day, while walking upon his roof, David notices Bathsheba who is bathing on her own roof. He sends for her even though he knows that she is the wife of Uriah and unfortunately she becomes pregnant as a result of his attentions. Trying to cover up his behavior, David sends a messenger asking that Uriah return from the battlefield to report on the battle, and having heard the report, instructs Uriah to go home for the night. Uriah refuses, instead sleeping with the guards at the king's door, for he does not think it is fit for him to enjoy his wife's company while his fellow soldiers are in the field. Hearing this, David invites him for supper and gets him drunk in the hopes that he will end up at home and later come to believe that the child Bathsheba is carrying is his own. But once again Uriah sleeps at the King's door. Desperate to cover up his indiscretion, David devises a plan that he sends to his field commander via Uriah's own hand. His plan is to place Uriah in the thick of the worst fighting, and then have his fellow soldiers withdraw from around him. Predictably, this results in Uriah's death, after which David takes Bathsheba to be his own wife.

This action was condemned by the prophet Nathan, and indeed by David himself before he understood fully the parable that Nathan told him, and the baby that was born from this adulterous relationship died much to David's distress. Still, after David had repented, Bathsheba bore David another son, Solomon, who would grow up to be the most prosperous King of Israel, who is also listed among the ancestors of Jesus.

Again, one might well ask, why is Matthew calling attention to the most despicable behavior of any of Jesus' ancestors? Surely he does not want to condone adultery and murder. But neither does he want to sweep it under the rug and pretend that it never happened.

The gospel – the good news – that is contained in the teachings of Jesus is not aimed at those who are already rich and powerful, enjoying the rewards of their standing in society as among the righteous - who are perceived to justly deserve the blessings that have been showered upon them. Rather, Jesus' message contains hope for those who are on the margins of society, the women of somewhat questionable reputation, and those who challenge a subservient role in society. His message is also one of hope for those who, despite having power and the advantages that come with it, have made tragic mistakes that might well end their careers, or at least their sense of being able to hold leadership positions in respectable society.

Who among us, if we limited our contributions to our fellow human beings by the stupidest thing we have ever done, would have much to contribute to the well-being of others? Mathew, in his recitation of Jesus' genealogy, is both letting us know that Jesus' rabbinical credentials are second to none, and that in his teaching, this rabbi will appeal to many of those whom the conventional teachers have overlooked or condemned. That light shines through the stories and struggles of these types of characters is indeed some of the best news we have the opportunity to celebrate at this time of year. May we each do our best to be faithful to our own sense of what the spirit of love would have us do, for it is only by doing so that we truly celebrate the joy of the season.

So May It Be