



From the Pulpit: January 14, 2024

The Second Sunday in Ordinary Time—Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Matthew 1:1–17

Jesus' Grandmothers, II: Tamar

Bill, Katie, Squire and I are preaching a sermon series about Jesus' grandmothers, those unlikely women listed in Matthew's version of Jesus' family tree. Last week Bill offered three reasons why this sprawling list of names matters¹:

1. The list is "bad history but good theology." That is to say, the list may not be historically accurate, but Matthew uses it to support the main argument which brackets the genealogy. Jesus is the Messiah. The Son of Abraham, and the Son of David.
2. Like most family trees, this one is full of both saints and sinners. The inclusion of the kind of people we don't invite to our own family holidays shows us that God's grace is limitless in its creativity and ability. God can and will use anything God desires—including horrific human mistakes and misdeeds—for God's redemptive intentions.
3. Lastly the inclusion of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary is unusual and unexpected but important. These five excluded, disenfranchised, and dishonored women foreshadow Jesus' ministry with women and others who were on the margins of first century society.

Today we will hear Tamar's tale. Before we do, I want to be honest with you about how difficult some of these women's stories are to hear.

When you begin to explore the lives behind the names on any family tree, even this one from the Bible, you are likely to find hard, even traumatic circumstances. As I wrestled with Tamar's text I recalled a book titled *Healing Haunted Histories* that has helped me to make sense of my own family history beginning with ancestors who arrived in North America in 1660 on a boat called the Spotted Cow. Generations later my family was one of the first five to arrive in the county I grew up in.

¹Bill Evertsberg, "Jesus' Grandmothers I: A Royal But Checkered Pedigree" preached January 7, 2024 at Kenilworth Union Church. <https://youtu.be/WN2luieRQXU?si=Lp0M-47COrZAYFkmi>

On a fourth grade Indiana history field trip we visited the pioneer family founders rock. Having my teacher and friends notice my last name on that boulder might be the closest I've come to feeling famous. On that same field trip we visited the Chief Menominee Monument which marks the Trail of Death

by which the Potawatomi removed to make way for settler families like mine.² I was blessed with teachers who taught history that included multiple perspectives.

Healing Haunted Histories has helped me to reflect upon my own ancestors so I've used Elaine Enns and Ched Meyers' outline to structure this sermon³ in a way that makes room for both the horrific and hopeful parts of Tamar's story, while nurturing hope for us today. They divide this reflective work into three themes: "the landlines" (where this family came from and how they got there), "bloodlines" (the experiences and stories of these ancestors), and "songlines"

(the traditions and practices that have been passed on to us that foster resilience and point us not toward guilt, but toward the work of justice and healing).

I'm only going to touch on the long and complicated landline that runs through Matthew's genealogy because I believe Squire is going to have more to say on that when he preaches on Rahab. But for today notice that Matthew highlights two prominent ancestors, and one pivotal event. From Abraham to David. From David to the Exile to Babylon. From the Exile to the Messiah. This list of names captures the sweeping move of a people from the south end of the Euphrates River, to Canaan, to enslavement in Egypt.

²<https://www.potawatomiheritage.com/encyclopedia/trail-of-death/>

³Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books (Wipf and Stock), 2021.

"She [Tamar] uses her wit and her wiles to secure what is due in this ancient patriarchal system: the security of family."

It fast forwards through Moses and the return to Canaan, to the eventual but brief united kingdom under David, followed by hundreds of years where foreign power after foreign power invades, including the Babylonians. All of this movement and conflict underlies the hope for a Messiah to make it right.

Tamar's story takes place within the Hebrew scriptures' fairly fuzzy explanation of how Jesus' ancestors end up enslaved in Egypt. Some of you were probably wondering when I was going to get to the scripture today. It took some introduction, but here we are.

Mature audiences are welcome to open your Bibles to Genesis chapter 38. I'll be using my own carefully crafted paraphrase, one that I am comfortable having my mom hear when she worships with us online:

After Judah sold his brother with the colorful coat, Joseph, to the Egyptians, he married and had three sons. Er, Onan, and Shelah. Tamar was married to the oldest son Er. Once she was married the responsibility for Tamar passed from her biological father to her husband's family. But Er died. So as was the marriage law of the time Tamar was married to the second son, Onan to carry on the eldest brother's family line, and ensure that the widow Tamar was taken care of. But Onan did not want to have children with Tamar, so he practiced an early form of family planning. Then Onan died and Tamar was widowed a second time. Judah should have then married Tamar to his third son Shelah, but Judah was reluctant, perhaps thinking Tamar had something to do with the deaths of the first two sons. So Judah sent Tamar back to her father to wait until Shelah was old enough, or at least that was the excuse. Tamar waited, Shelah came of age, but Judah did not send for Tamar, leaving her in a vulnerable place socially and financially.

One day Tamar heard that her father in law, Judah was going to be on a business trip to a nearby town to shear his sheep. So Tamar dressed herself up as a prostitute and waited for Judah to pass by her corner. Not recognizing her, he negotiates his price: one kid from his flock. Judah doesn't have the animal with him and Venmo hasn't been invented yet so he offers his ancient form of identification as collateral: his signet and staff. After the interlude Judah sends his friend back with the payment, but Tamar is nowhere to be found. Not wanting to look foolish Judah opts not to look for her further.

Months after Judah's encounter with his disguised daughter in law, he learns that Tamar is pregnant. Judah, as is his right under ancient marriage law orders Tamar's execution. But Tamar pulls out the signet and the staff and says, "Not so fast it was the owner of these who made me pregnant." Judah admits that these items are his and says "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah."

Tamar becomes mother of twins, one of whom is King David's seventh great grandfather if I've counted the "begats" correctly. Thus endeth the PG13 version of how Tamar becomes one of Jesus' grandmothers. Don't worry I am not going to suggest that this text is helpful in thinking about 21st century marriage and relationships.

On these recent cold and snowy nights I've been binge watching the two seasons of the HBO series *Julia*. Many times I have googled to see if certain events in the show are historically accurate. Did Julia pay for *The French Chef* pilot? No. Was WGBH reluctant to air the show? Again no. Was Julia Child shaken by feminist Betty Freidan's critique of *The French Chef* because it encouraged women to spend more time in the kitchen? No record of such a conversation exists.⁴ Like Matthew's genealogy, the *Julia* series on HBO is bad history, but with a good message. The series is crafted to highlight both the subtle and overt ways women, like producer Alice Naman and Julia's best friend Avis, exercised their rights in the 1960s. Julia's relationship to the women's movement was complicated. As an early female television personality, she broke new ground and inspired many. But the content of her show is traditionally considered "women's work". In this fictionalized account of her life Julia uses wit and culinary skills to get men to allow her to host her own TV show. In HBO's retelling, Julia's distinctive voice and signature chocolate cakes open doors closed by closed-minded men. Julia's character is charming but cunning. Julia is a trickster. And so is Tamar.⁵

With a father-in-law unwilling to care for her well-being, Tamar takes her fate into her own hands. She uses her wit and her wiles to secure what is due in this ancient patriarchal system: the security of family. The Women's Bible Commentary puts it this way, "[Tamar] Doesn't try to challenge the system of the time but does hold men accountable for maintaining the status and rights of the n."⁶ She becomes according to one source⁷, the only woman in the Old Testament to be called "righteous."

⁴Jay Collier, "Separating Fact vs. Fiction in the Life of Julia Child," accessed online at <https://www.wgbhalumni.org/2022/05/16/fact-fiction-julia-child/>

⁵Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, Jacqueline Lapsley, *Women's Bible Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012, 42.

⁶Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, Jacqueline Lapsley, *Women's Bible Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012, 43.

⁷Irene Nowell, "Jesus' Great Grandmothers: Matthew's Four and More," *Catholic Bible Quarterly*, 2008, 5.

"God will use what God will to accomplish God's will."

Many have called Tamar's tale scandalous. But focusing on the dicey details obscures the reason she might be included in Matthew's version of Jesus genealogy: God will use what God will to accomplish God's will. Tamar illustrates God's definition of righteousness, which is concerned for the vulnerable. We see this *unexpected* kind of righteousness so often in Jesus' ministry we should expect it by now; Jesus talked with and ate with many whom society considers scandalous and unworthy.

Jesus' righteousness is doubly inherited. First from his divine parent who cares for the least, the lost and the left out. And also from his grandmother Tamar, who shows us that God's righteousness transcends our imperfect, human laws and systems. Righteousness is the trait passed through the bloodline of Jesus' ancestry.

Now let us find the songline of hope that emerges from this complicated history.

Tomorrow is the actual birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King who was born in 1929 into his parents' Alberta Williams King and Martin Luther King Sr's family tree.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that Dr. King led had its own ancestors that helped pave the way in the decades before. Ella Baker is called "The Mother of the Civil Rights Movement." Around the time Dr. King was born, Ella Baker graduated college and got to work organizing people and campaigns for influential organizations like the NAACP and eventually the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.⁸ Miss Baker which I understand is the respectful way to address her, taught ordinary people to stand up for themselves. Her work for rights was vital but behind the scenes. She knew how to get crowds of young people to show up and stand up.

One of my professors and early mentors in my educational career was Dr. Charles Payne, who wrote this about the essential quality of Ella Baker's often unseen work: "If ordinary people aren't capable of standing up for their own interest, whatever concessions are won today can be withdrawn tomorrow."⁹ She earned the nickname "Fundi," a Swahili word meaning a person who teaches a craft to the next generation.¹⁰

Tamar, Ella Baker, Julia Child, and countless women offer a rich, inherited songline of hope. This is what we are looking for in these stories of Jesus' grandmothers.

"Tamar, who shows us that God's righteousness transcends our imperfect, human laws and systems. Righteousness is the trait passed through the bloodline of Jesus' ancestry."

Let me end with poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama's prayer¹¹ for these five women:

"Grandmothers of Jesus: In your stories we hear of your courage and creativity, your tenacity, and the things you faced down. Here, today, we stand in the time after you and look back, with gratitude for stories like yours that help us live today. Help us live today in all the stories of our lives so that we can stand in your great ache and wash. Amen."

⁹Charles Payne and Carol Sills Strickland, *Teach Freedom, Education for Liberation in the African American Tradition*, New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2008, 57.

¹⁰<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ella-Baker>

¹¹Pádraig Ó Tuama, *Being Here: Prayers for Curiosity, Justice, and Love*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024.

Other Commentaries Consulted:

Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation Series*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010.

Jason Hood, *The Messiah, His Brothers, and the Nations: (Matthew 1:1–17)*, London: T&T Clark, 2011.

Cynthia Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson (Editors), *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Volume 1*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013.

⁸<https://ellabakercenter.org/who-was-ella-baker/>

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

*O Everlasting Light,
Mercy Mild,
Great Spirit,
Abba Father,
Mother Hen,
Lord Adonai,
Yahweh,
the Great I Am,
we turn to you, unknowable,
and yet in everything,
embracing us,
and embraced within us.*

*We are here, blizzard and cold,
everything bright white,
encrusted in a powdered blanket
that drifts and packs,
collecting on every branch and bush.*

*This crystalline blank slate prioritized
only what matters most:
just enough warmth,
just enough food,
just enough company
to make it one day to the next.*

*We need only this,
and some sort of pivotal divine encounter,
a deliberate mid-winter devotion in your presence.*

*So, draw near.
Draw near and shape us by your divine wisdom.
Draw near, enter in, and let your presence transform us.*

*Today, in faith, we stand in the ancient lineage
of Jesus, grandmother after grandmother
offering sustaining hope generation to generation,
and we realize that you come to us in the mystery
of Jesus who is for each and for all,
for those of us too young to be heard,
too old to be seen,*

*too lost to be found,
too sad to be cheered,
too overwhelmed to be at peace.
In you, we are heard, we are seen,
we are found,
we are given a sacred abundance,
an extra portion of unspeakable joy
and unprecedented peace.*

*With eyes wide open,
we know the realities of the world.
In so far as there is trouble and injustice,
hardship and embarrassment,
ignorance and pain,
struggle and uncertainty,
be with us.*

*Carry us.
Ground us.
Guide us.
Make a way forward.
Make a way through.
Use our hot exasperation at injustice
to kindle a new kind of peace,
one where love is more persuasive
than revenge,
where the everyday miracle
of summer sunshine and rain
becomes a winter loaf of bread
that can feed and change lives.*

*In a world where death and suffering and sorrow
seem matter-of-fact,
help us to write your dream into the world,
your peace fall upon us,
Make us whole.*

And hear our prayer.

In faith and in hope, we lift up our hearts to you,

O God, with Jesus' prayer... Our Father... Amen.

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