

Genesis 38
Nevertheless She Persisted: The Women in Jesus' Family Tree
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One of the fastest-growing hobbies right now is genealogy. The internet has made it easy to access billions of records, like census data and passenger lists. Occasionally people run across something really unexpected as they research their family trees.

I heard one person talk about how uncomfortable she was when she read that her husband's great-grandma was listed as a "stripper" in one of the census reports she ran across. She was speechless, she was so shocked. After the shock wore off, she realized the young woman was actually a tobacco stripper.

I bet any of us doing genealogy research would run into some surprises about our families. There is an Old English proverb that says, "He who has no fools, knaves, or beggars in his family was begotten by a flash of lightning. This week, I asked my brother if we had any interesting characters in our family tree. He said he didn't know of any to which I replied, "I wish we had a bank robber in our family." I got the big brother eye roll via text.

It seems fitting that today, as we celebrate All Saints Day, we begin a new sermon series on Jesus' family tree, specifically the four women (other than Mary), included in the genealogy of Jesus recorded in chapter one of the Gospel of Matthew. We aren't going to run into any bank robbers, but we are going to hear the stories of some badass women.

If you are like most people, when you stumble upon a genealogy text in the Bible, you skim it and move on. They aren't fun to read, and they don't seem to move the plot along. Their purpose is usually to serve as story connectors and to lend credibility to what follows. The patriarchy that existed in the ancient world made Matthew's inclusion of women in his accounting of Jesus' family tree very unusual. So, one question we will be asking throughout this series is, "Why? Why did he include Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba?"

I've told you before that some of my favorite memories of my grandma are of her telling me stories about people in our family as I lay on the couch "taking a rest" in the afternoon. I am sure she was hoping I would actually go to sleep. I did not. I loved listening to tales of the olden days and the people I only knew because she told me about them.

I had in mind those moments with my grandma when I imagined that the stories of the women mentioned in Jesus' family tree were stories that Mary told him. She told him about where the women lived, what their lives were like, and what became of them. If

Mary was anything like my grandma, she told the same stories again and again. I imagine that Jesus grew up admiring these women who were smart and courageous. Throughout this series, I want us to reflect on how the stories of these women might have impacted who Jesus was and what he taught his followers.

We begin with Tamar. Her story is found in Genesis 38. Her story is part of the biblical narrative focused on Joseph. You will recall that Joseph was Jacob's favorite son, which got to be annoying to his brothers, so they got rid of him by selling him into slavery. Joseph ended up serving Pharaoh in Egypt. While Joseph was there, Judah, one of his brothers, married a Canaanite woman named Shua. The two of them had 3 sons. Er, Onan, and Shelah (Shell-ah).

Judah arranged for his oldest son, Er, to marry Tamar. According to the story, Er was wicked, so before the couple had children, God killed him. In the ancient world, when someone died young or unexpectedly, it was assumed that the person had done something to tick God off. Tamar was now a woman in a patriarchal world without a husband or a son to care for her. According to Israelite law, the deceased husband's brother was obligated to marry and have children with the widow. Those children would be the deceased brother's heirs. This was called a Levirate marriage. Judah told Onan to go to Tamar, take her as his wife, and make some babies with her. Onan wanted his own offspring, not his brothers, so when the couple did what couples do, he "spilled his seed" and Tamar did not get pregnant. This displeased God, so Onan met the same fate as his brother.

Judah had lost two of his three sons. If he lost the third, he would be left without an heir, which was the worst thing that could happen to a man. He told Tamar that she could have his third son, Shelah, when he grew old enough, so in the meantime, she should go back and live with her father. Since Tamar was a social and economic member of his family, Judah's returning Tamar to her father was not a good thing. It kind of said, "I'm done here." He didn't say this out loud, but he had no intention of taking a risk with his last son.

Tamar returned to her father's house as neither a virgin, nor a wife, nor a mother. She was on the fringes of the Israelite social structure. She didn't belong anywhere. She was boxed in by patriarchy and the system had failed her miserably. It was then that Tamar became the hero of her own story.

This is Genesis 38:12-26.

12 In the course of time Judah's wife died; when Judah's time of mourning was over, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. 13 When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," 14 she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim(i-nay-im), which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. 15 When Judah

saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. 16 He went over to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come into you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come into me?" 17 He answered, "I will send you a kid from the flock." And she said, "Only if you give me a pledge until you send it." 18 He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and the staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went into her, and she conceived by him. 19 Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

20 When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. 21 He asked the townspeople, "Where is the prostitute who was at Enaim (i-nay-im) by the wayside?" But they said, "No prostitute has been here." 22 So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her; moreover, the townspeople said, 'No prostitute has been here.'" 23 Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her."

24 About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has prostituted herself; moreover, she is pregnant as a result of prostitution." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." 25 As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant." And she said, "Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." 26 Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not lie with her again.

The image that comes to mind when I read about Tamar changing from her widow's clothes to those of a prostitute is of Lynda Carter as Wonder Woman in the 70s. She would do a pirouette shedding her civilian clothes and emerging as Wonder Woman.

Tamar's change of clothes signaled a change in the story. Until this point, her story was about what happened to her because of the messiness of the men in her life. In the Hebrew Bible women's stories always operate against the backdrop of patriarchy, usually as sort of a side note. But the stories of Tamar and the rest of the women in this series are stories of women whose independent actions further the plot and provide the main point of interest.

In her veil, Tamar waited for Judah and predictably he asked for sex. As payment, she was given his signet seal, the cord from which it hung, and his staff, which was likely marked with his seal. Judah's possessions were a sign of his identity and his authority. Like a signet ring, the seal bore the man's sign and was used to make impressions on objects or documents to indicate ownership or origin. Only a man would carry a staff and it would likely have had the man's sign on it as well. Tamar changed back into her

widow's clothes and when Judah's friend came to exchange Judah's possessions for the goat, the "prostitute" was nowhere to be found.

When Tamar was found to be pregnant, Judah, as the patriarch of the family into which she married, got to decide her fate. How convenient. He got to determine if the person he had wronged would live or die, and the law was not on her side. She was to be burned. There is a double irony at play here. With no hesitation, Judah embraced the whore, yet with no hesitation, he wanted to put to death the one who whored. In addition, Judah was about to burn his own children (we find out later Tamar was pregnant with twins) and their mother. Apparently, as far as Judah was concerned, what was good for the goose was not good for the gander. But Tamar had her insurance policy: Judah's possessions. And miraculously, when Judah was presented with them, he took responsibility not only for her pregnancy but for how he had treated her.

I imagine Mary telling this story to Jesus as an adolescent and him looking at her and saying, "She was a badass" and Mary laughing and saying, "Oh my dear, our family is full of badass women, but more than that, the world is full of badass women." That probably did not happen, but something more important might have. I see in Jesus' life evidence that, while he was undoubtedly influenced by the patriarchal world in which he lived, he believed in the worth of women and acted accordingly.

In the story of the Canaanite woman and her daughter in Matthew 15:21-28. A woman went to Jesus pleading for him to go and save her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus ignored her and his disciples urged him to send her way. He told them he was sent only to "the lost sheep of Israel." The woman begged him for help saying, "Lord, help me." And Jesus said, perhaps the most offensive thing he could have said (in fact so offensive I would call it racist), "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," which translates to, "I am not here to help people like you who are beneath me." But the woman pushed back, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

I wonder if the story of Tamar flashed through Jesus' mind. I wonder if he remembered his mom's voice or her laughter when they talked about the women in his family. Whatever the reason, Jesus listened to this Canaanite woman, who was not only a woman, she was an outsider. He listened and because she had the courage to push back, he really saw her, he saw her suffering and he saw her faith. And he changed his mind. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed.

Now, truth be told, scholars have big questions about whether Jesus actually said any of these things. Why? Because the idea that Jesus was sent only to the Jews was an early Christian idea, not a Jesus idea. In their book, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say*, the Jesus Seminar scholars write, "[Jesus'] freedom with respect to ritual

and purity taboos, and his openness to non-conforming Judeans, suggests that he would not have advocated a mission restricted to Judeans in Galilee. Such statements as the one in vs. 24...were undoubtedly the creation of [the author of] Matthew or his community.”¹

And this is the perfect time to circle back to the question I posed earlier “Why did the writer of Matthew include Tamar in his rendering of Jesus’ genealogy?” Literary foreshadowing...Tamar’s story anticipates three important themes within the Gospel of Matthew.

The first theme is perfectly illustrated by the story of the Canaanite woman I just mentioned. Throughout this Gospel, there are stories of Gentile outsiders (like Tamar) who respond more appropriately to Jesus’ message than the insiders (like Judah) and because of that, they find inclusion among God’s people. It is a reversal of expectations. The people we expect to get it don’t and the ones we don’t expect to get it, do.

Second, Tamar’s story is of one who moves from being marginalized to being honored. In Matthew, in story after story, Jesus reaches out to and honors the ones on the margins by sitting at the table with them, touching them, and healing them.

And third, ultimately, the author of Matthew told a story about Jesus as the Messiah, as the fulfillment of prophecy, to a Jewish community. The inclusion of Tamar introduces the importance of women in the salvation story being told in this Gospel. She not only bears a son who Matthew traces as an ancestor of the Messiah, Tamar also illustrates one of the key discipleship virtues present in the Matthean narrative. In Tamar’s story and in Matthew, the virtue of righteousness is relational. Righteousness isn’t something someone possesses in a vacuum, righteousness is something practiced in relationships with others.

What I love about Tamar’s story is not just that she was a badass. I love that her actions caused Judah to do the right thing. Her trickery not only provided a path forward for her, it provided a path forward for him. It was Tamar who brought both back to where they belonged in that time and place. If we followed Judah’s story further, we would see a changed man when the Joseph story picks back up in the biblical narrative. We would see a man whose behavior reflected the righteousness gifted to him through his relationship with Tamar, and the righteousness that, many years later, Jesus taught his followers about and that we can learn and practice too. The way we treat other people is the greatest reflection of what we believe.

I would like to think that the stories of Jesus’ ancestors, the stories of the saints who came before him, impacted what he believed and who he became. Who are your saints? Who are the ones whose lives have impacted what you believe or who you are

¹ Funk, Robert W., Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?*, Polebridge Press: New York, 1993, 204.

becoming? I am realizing, as I grieve the loss of my mom, that although we were very different people, her life has impacted me in ways I did not acknowledge until I had to do the hard work of grief. In serving this church, I have been impacted by the stories of members I never met...people like Roger Alexander and Gordon Grant. There are saints in this room and saints worshiping remotely who are the people I want to be when I grow up.

The best way for us to honor the saints in our lives is to live the love they showed us. And that includes Jesus. If we want to honor Jesus' life, as his followers, we should live the love he showed us. We should live the courage and the sacrifice he demonstrated. We have been gifted so many people from whom we can learn. I look forward to continuing to learn and grow with you. Amen.