

"Surprising People"

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Sunday, December 19, 2021

Based on Brian D. McLaren *We Make the Road by Walking*, Chapter 17

Texts: Psalm 34: 1-18 and Matthew 1: 1-17

Our Bible has several scriptures that are all about genealogy. Honestly, I've never paid much attention to them. Yes, you can pick out the "big names" in the genealogy, like King David, Abraham, and the like, but it was not long ago that I first discovered, with the help of Brian McLaren, that the genealogy of Matthew's Gospel includes five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary the mother of Jesus. You should find this surprising, for in "the ancient world, people were unaware of the existence of the human egg and assumed that a man provided the only seed of new life. So, ancestor lists naturally focused on men. It's surprising enough for Matthew to include women at all, but the women he selects are quite astonishing."

Let's look at them, briefly, one by one. First, there is more than one Tamar in the Old Testament. The one Matthew refers to is in the book of Genesis, chapter 38. There are two others, whom we read about in 2 Samuel. One is

mentioned briefly, and the other is part of a tragic story involving her brother. But for our purposes, we are talking about the Tamar of Genesis. According to McLaren, “she once had posed as a prostitute in a web of sexual and family intrigue.”

Then there is Rahab – a Gentile (which means non-Jewish, she was a Canaanite) of Jericho who was a prostitute. She is found in the book of Joshua, Chapters 2-6 and is a heroine of the Old Testament as she hides and aids in the escape of two Israelite spies from the city of Jericho.

We can’t forget Ruth – also a Gentile who entered a sexual liaison with a wealthy Jew named Boaz. We read about her in the book of Ruth, and she is linked to Abraham through his nephew, Lot.

Then there is Bathsheba. She was married to a foreigner – Uriah the Hittite – and with whom King David committed adultery. You’ll find her story in 2 Samuel as well.

“Finally, there was Mary, mother of Jesus.” We talked about her last week but remember that she claimed to be pregnant without the help of Joseph. While we venerate her today, it was not always that way...at least not at first.

McLaren reminds us that “these are not the kind of women whose names were typically included in ancestor lists of the past!” If they were to be included at all, don’t you think that we could have picked those of upstanding moral character? How about people who attended temple every week? People who kept all ten commandments. Aren’t there “better” people to lift up in such a listing of important people?

What if that was Matthew’s point all along? “Jesus isn’t entering into the pristine story of ideal people.” Let’s read that again: “Jesus isn’t entering in the pristine story of ideal people.” This is critically important for people like us. Maybe we haven’t done the same thing these five women did in their time, but I think you’ll agree that in some ways we are not ideal people, either! So many people in the Christian faith seem to think that it is the morally perfect, so-called “ideal” people whom God most loves. And the rest of us...well...you know...God may tolerate us, but we certainly aren’t examples of faithfulness to be upheld. That is true unless and until you read our Bible. I cannot think of one character in our Biblical narrative that was perfect, or even nearly so. Some of them committed terrible acts. I’m not saying that we commit terrible acts *in order* to be used by God for God’s purposes, but I am saying that even if we have blemishes in

our moral history that we are not forsaken or forgotten, but in fact, we may be in the forefront of God's mission in the world.

McLaren continues, "Jesus is part of the story of Gentiles as well as Jews, broken and messy families as well as noble ones, normal folks as well as kings and priests and heroes. We might say that Jesus isn't entering humanity from the top with a kind of trickle-down grace, but rather from the bottom, with grace that rises from the grass roots up."

Matthew is not the only Gospel writer that lifts this fact. Luke uses shepherds in chapter 2, verses 8-20, that most familiar of Christmas scriptures. The unsung heroes of that story are the shepherds. "They are the ones who, along with Joseph and Mary, have front-row seats to welcome the 'good news of great joy for all the people.' They're down-to-Earth people who heart he celestial announcement from angelic messengers." They were marginal people in the society of Jesus' day. Sounds a little like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. Shepherds were not normal "family" men, because they lived outdoors most of the time, guarding sheep from wolves and thieves, and guiding sheep to suitable pasture. "It was among poor men like these that Jesus' birth was first celebrated."

I'm making the same point I've made all the way through Advent: Jesus' birth is not some romanticized, sanitized, spiritualized event. Jesus was born to and among those people who are not found in many churches across the land today. People that are looked down upon or simply judged as unworthy of God are the *very* people that star in the Biblical narrative! That doesn't mean that those who have been upstanding fine citizens are not included in the biblical story, it is that we all are part of the Biblical story. But it is especially true that those who feel left out, lost, left behind, excluded, and marginalized, sinful, and sad, hurting, and mistreated, or any other disqualifying feeling can hear the true good news of the Gospel. God is with you, for you, choosing you, among you, loving you, calling you, gracing you, adopting you, whatever language you need to see that you belong in the household and commonwealth of a loving God! I don't know how this message was lost in the Christian story, but to a large degree it has been. We have so beat people down with their sinful unworthiness that we forgot to read our Bible that tells us repeatedly that it's those who are lost, last and least that are accepted, loved, and included.

Where our self-righteousness excludes, God includes. Where our "holier than thou" smugness raises its head, God says, "what have you done for the least of these, my people?" Where we sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful," we get surprised

about who is included in “all ye.” Christmas is the most obvious presentation of the real message and ministry of Jesus Christ, our redeemer. I believe that if the church fully embraced the true Biblical message of welcome and grace, our sanctuaries would be bursting. But instead, we have focused on our goodness and the fallenness of those not like us. We can choose otherwise. It may be the greatest Christmas gift the church has ever given the world. Our job is to make people belong. Let God manage most of the rest.

In the name of the humble, poor, manger-born Son of the Living God.

Amen.