The Family Tree

Matthew 1:1-16
Jesus’ Extended Family
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The Baseball Hall of Fame is located, as many of you know, in Cooperstown, New York. Or is it in Chevy Chase, Maryland? Actually, both. The men are enshrined in Cooperstown, but the women are in the National Women’s Baseball Hall of Fame just up the road in Chevy Chase. There are many Halls of Fame scattered across our nation. The Country Music Hall of Fame is in Nashville, and the Pro Football Hall of Fame is in Canton, Ohio. There is also a Hall of Fame dedicated to clowns, another to clogging, and still another to ukuleles.

No one in our family has ever made it into anyone’s Hall of Fame, and we probably never will. On the other hand, we do have, in our Arizona home, something that we call “The Wall of Fame.” It’s the wall where we display pictures of our children and grandchildren, our parents and grandparents, our brothers and their families. Unless I miss my guess you also have a Wall of Fame. You are just as proud of your family as we are of ours, so you too have a gallery of smiling pictures somewhere in your home.

Missing from our Wall of Fame are the pirates and cattle thieves, the black sheep in our family. I’m proud that one of the branches of my family tree holds the name of Ozias Bidwell, a sergeant in the Connecticut militia during the American Revolution. I’m not so proud that on the other side of the family there is a deserter from the Swedish army. One fought for his country; the other dropped his gun and walked away.

But that’s how it is with every family, and Jesus is no exception. He too, has an indiscriminate ancestry. For example, there are patriarchs and peasants in this genealogy. Abraham is here, the great founder of the Hebrew people. Abraham is “the” patriarch, the man who obeyed God’s call to walk away from civilized Chaldea to start all over again in backwoods Canaan. At the other end of the social scale there is Mary who, in all probability, was a teenage peasant with no credentials and few prospects before God invited her to mother the Messiah.

There are women as well as men in Jesus’ genealogy. Well, you say, of course there are. How could there be a family tree without women? But when you read the long genealogies in Genesis, Numbers, and First Chronicles, you will find very few women mentioned, because to the ancient Hebrews it was the male line that really counted. No women are to be found in the Genesis genealogies, and only a few women are in Numbers and Chronicles, no more than a dozen or so in lists that contain hundreds of men. But here in Matthew four women appear in a genealogy containing forty-two male names. That’s a much higher percentage. So Matthew, living in a decidedly patriarchal culture, dares to lift up the role of women in Jesus’ family tree.

Again, there are family and foreigners in this roster. Isaac and Jacob are here, full-blooded descendants of Abraham, but so are Ruth and Rahab, both of them gentiles, and therefore rank outsiders. The purpose of a genealogy in those days was to prove that a family had been kept pure from gentile contamination. But Matthew wants us to know from the very start that God is not a racist, nor is God’s Son Jesus. God’s work, our work in the world, is universal and interracial. We draw no racial/ethnic lines. We raise no artificial barriers here. “God so loved the WORLD that he gave his only Son, so that EVERYONE who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

And there are saints and sinners in the list. Hezekiah and Josiah were devout worshipers of God. Rahab, on the other hand, ran a house of ill repute in Jericho. Tamar deliberately tricked her father-in-law into having intercourse with her. If this were my genealogy, I might omit Rahab and Tamar altogether, or at least relegate them to the fine print in the appendix. But here they are, specifically mentioned as great-grandmothers of the Messiah. David was perhaps an even more heinous sinner. He not only had an adulterous liaison with Bathsheba; he then arranged to have Bathsheba’s husband killed so he could marry his widow.

Why do you suppose Matthew mounted such a blemished gallery? Why didn’t he take down all the unattractive portraits in our Lord’s parentage? It was, I believe, to establish beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus was truly human. Though he himself led a sinless life, the genes of a hundred generations flowed into his life. “He was conceived by the Holy Ghost,” says the Apostles’ Creed.

Does that shock you? But you can’t have it any other way. Let’s be accused of the ancient heresy of Docetism, we must hold fast to the full humanity as well as the full deity of Jesus Christ. The Docetists, embarrassed by the thought that Jesus might be really human, taught that Jesus only appeared to be a man. In fact, they said, he was pure God, wearing as it were a human mask. But if Jesus was not really human, how could he feel our fears and celebrate our joys? How could he know what it is to be alive, and how could he comfort us when we come to die? No, if we give up the limitations of his humanity we also lose the benefits of his deity. It would be as if we were lying injured on the sidewalk while a paramedic waved at us from the other side of the street, said “Have a good day!” and then walked away. Jesus didn’t come to wave and walk away. As the heir of all these generations Jesus became one of us and is therefore of infinite worth to us. “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,” writes the author of Hebrews, “but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15-16) And help we will get because Jesus knows from first-hand experience who we are and what we are facing.

So let me draw your gaze away from all the influential ancestors in Jesus’ indiscriminate ancestry, and ask that you focus on the incomparable Jesus. His is the portrait that towers above all the others. His is the face that radiates the redeeming love of God. He is...
the Savior who atones for all the lies and conspiracies, all the intrigues and idolatries, all the adulteries and killings, in short, for all
the sins of all the people in this blemished genealogy. That, I believe, is Matthew's ultimate purpose for recording all these names,
the good and the not so good, and then ending the list with "Jesus...who is called the Messiah." He is telling us that Jesus came
through sinners, for sinners. In fact, Matthew's whole purpose for writing this gospel is to proclaim the Messiah's mercy to sinners
like David and Tamar, to sinners like you and me.

It struck me as I was preparing this sermon that there is no picture of Jesus in our home back in Scottsdale. There are plenty of
family pictures. There is even a photograph of Abraham Lincoln, taken just a few days before his death, and a painting of George
Washington kneeling to pray in the snow of Valley Forge. But there is not a single picture of Jesus. On the other hand, there is a
cross on the wall just inside the front door. And in the deepest and most profound sense, that cross is what Jesus looked like. With
arms outstretched and feet nailed to a wooden upright, Jesus "died for our sins." (That's Paul's word in 1 Corinthians 15:3) And in
his letter to the Colossians Paul wrote, "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself
all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." (2:19-20)

So when you look at the cross, you are looking at a picture of Jesus. And when you look at the Communion Table, you see another
portrait of Jesus. For though you will me standing behind the Table, Jesus is the true host, and he welcomes all of us to partake of
the meal which he has prepared. No one is excluded here. All are welcome, male and female, young and old, citizens and non-
citizens, Presbyterians and non-Presbyterians, and above all sinners, which means every person in this sanctuary.

The Table is ready, the meal is prepared. In the name of Jesus the Messiah, I invite you to partake of the bread of forgiveness and the
cup of eternal life.