

Tamar: She Stood Up for Justice

Genesis 38:1-26

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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Four weeks ago Carol and I stood in the great hall of Duart Castle on the Isle of Mull just off the west coast of Scotland. Duart is the home of Clan MacLean, Carol's clan, and among the displays was a chart showing the succession of lairds, or clan chiefs, starting with Gillean MacLean in 1174 and running down through the centuries to the present laird, Sir Lachlin MacLean. Once in awhile across those long centuries, there was no male heir. Then the line shifted to the son of a younger brother, and that nephew carried the birthright forward into a new generation. There may be a woman on the throne of England, but only a man can sit on the dais at Duart Castle!

The same was true of Old Testament clans, because it was believed that only a first-born son could carry the family honor, the family traditions, and the family name from one generation to another. So when Judah chose Tamar to marry his first-born son Er, he expected not only to have a grandchild to bounce on his knee in a year or so, but a male heir who would carry forward the dynasty that began with his great-grandfather Abraham.

And when Er died without producing a son, something called levirate law came into force. Levirate law dictated that if a widow were childless she would be given to her deceased husband's brother for as long as it took to produce a male child. That boy would carry on the family name.

But when the brother also dies without giving Tamar a son, Judah finds himself on the horns of a dilemma. He needs a male grandson, but he has only one son left to produce that boy. Levirate law required that he give Tamar to that son, but since his first two sons died after being married to Tamar, Judah is deathly afraid his third son will also die. So what does Judah do? He tells Tamar she must wait a few years until Shelah grows up. Then he sends Tamar back to her father, hoping she will forget his promise.

But Tamar doesn't forget. She is the victim of injustice, of Judah's deliberate refusal to keep his promise and his defiance of the law. But what can she do about it? Legally, nothing at all. Judah has all the power. He is a rich, influential male in a rigidly patriarchal society, while Tamar is a woman without rights, a piece of used goods, rejected by her powerful father-in-law. So in the name of justice Tamar steps outside the law. She dresses like a prostitute, tricks her father-in-law into having intercourse with her, and sure enough, she becomes pregnant with not one, but twin baby boys. It was an immoral act, yet Judah himself later confesses (in public no less), "She is more in the right than I." That is, what she did, though morally wrong and punishable by death, was justifiably right, and therefore undeserving of death.

Today we would call Tamar's behavior civil disobedience. She deliberately violated the law in order to focus public attention on the injustice done to her. And she was by no means the last to do so. The founders of this nation engaged in civil disobedience when they threw East India tea into Boston harbor, when they resisted the Stamp Act, when committees of correspondence mounted demonstrations in defiance of the law, and most flagrantly when they took up arms against the king. The Declaration of Independence explains and defends those acts of civil disobedience when it says, "When a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security." Every Fourth of July we glorify the American Revolution without, perhaps, stopping to consider that a revolution is nothing less than a forcible overthrow of a lawful government; in a word, an act of civil disobedience.

In more recent times think of Mahatma Gandhi, whose non-violent resistance against the British raj won independence for his people. Think of Rosa Parks who, in defiance of the laws of Montgomery, Alabama,

refused to give up her seat on the bus, and who thereby set off a chain reaction of civil disobedience so that African Americans would never again have to move to the back of the bus. Think of Martin Luther King, whose civil disobedience contributed so greatly to the abolition of racial discrimination.

Of course, not all injustices cry out for civil disobedience. Most call simply for the courage to stand up to the perpetrators and to say, "What you're doing is wrong, and we demand that you make it right." You may pay a price for it. Some have lost their jobs. Others have endured the pejorative label "whistle blower." But in the end there is the satisfaction that an injustice has been rectified, the rights of the injured have been restored, and the world has been cleansed of at least one of its darker stains.

No one said it's easy to stand up for justice, but we may take courage from Tamar who took on the powerful people of her day and, by bearing Judah's baby, became an ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, when Matthew lays out Jesus' genealogy in the first chapter of his gospel, he lists five women among the forty men, and one of the five is Tamar. You and I may question her morality but Matthew isn't bothered one bit. Because she stood up for justice, Matthew is proud to include Tamar as one of the grandmothers of Jesus.

And when you speak up against discrimination, when you stand up against bigotry, when you fight against fraudulence, when you step up to the plate in behalf of an aggrieved neighbor or an ill-treated colleague, you join ranks, not only with Tamar, but with Jesus who without fail went to bat for the little people, even to the extent that he broke the law to heal lepers and give sight to the blind. On the Sabbath Day. And for breaking those laws, he, like Tamar, was condemned to die. Unlike Tamar, he was not spared at the last minute. Yet out of that gross injustice—the execution of an innocent man—God has fashioned a new kind of justice. Paul writes, "For our sake (God) made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21) I call this the justice of grace: the Author of the moral law, the supreme Judge of human behavior, the God who is so holy that he can have nothing to do with sin or sinners, stepped down off his throne, stripped himself of every divine prerogative, and willingly took upon himself the penalty we deserve. Jesus suffered that heinous injustice for us, so that through his sacrifice we might be made right with God.

The next time someone at the office is treated unfairly and you want to duck because it's not your problem, remember the justice of grace and go to bat for that colleague. When you see the faces of hungry children on the TV screen and you want to change the channel because they're not your children, remember Jesus Christ who paid the ultimate price for their salvation as well as yours, and dig deep to make their lives better.

No, we'll never achieve perfect justice this side of heaven. The late Lewis Smedes wrote, "The Bible is not congenial to the assumption that we might create a perfect system of justice. But neither does it allow us to be comfortable with injustice. It drives us to try to achieve some fragments of justice within the changing scenes of fallen humanity in the moment of history we share together."

There is not a person here this morning who cannot achieve at least "some fragment of justice." Remember Jesus Christ and the justice of grace. Then, when it's necessary, step up to the plate, so that, in the words of today's Prayer of Confession, "each may live for all, and all may care for each, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord."