

Jesus' Grandmothers: Not Whom You'd Expect

Matthew 1:1-16

The Christmas Pageant

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Even the most devoted Bible readers used to pass over these genealogies. "Boring," they said to themselves, as they flipped the page to the next chapter. But today almost everyone is into genealogy. And it's not just that we want to know whether we are Sons or Daughters of the Revolution. Rather, because we now know what ancient people could only suspect: we are the products of our past. Who we are and what we do are, in large measure, determined by our ancestry. And this is no less true of Jesus. His genealogy contains significant clues to his identity, and to his mission in life.

Notice, for example, the four women in this list: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. The late Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown asked, "Why bring on the ladies?" And he put the question like that because in ancient times genealogies consisted almost exclusively of men. Women were added only if they could enhance the dignity of one's lineage. But to his contemporaries, these four women did not dignify Jesus; in fact, quite the contrary.

Because, for one thing, all four were Gentiles. That may not mean much to us today, but back then people were obsessed with racial purity. Having a Gentile in one's family tree was tantamount to having one's worst enemy for a grandmother. One might be excluded from society or even run out of town if you were a descendant of a mixed marriage.

Even today, some people reinvent their family trees to rid themselves of embarrassing ancestors. In a short story by Dick Francis, a young woman named Joannie invents a genealogy full of aristocratic forebears to cover up her lower class Welsh background. She detests her mother's coarse grammar and earthy manners, so she shuts her mother, Mona, out of her life completely. But then a wealthy couple hire Mona to handle their racehorses, and she promptly produces a steady string of winners. Even then, Joannie won't give her the time of day. Then, while her employers are out of the country, Mona falls ill. Joannie refuses to come to her aid and Mona dies. When the employers return, they stage a number of public events to honor Mona, and she becomes a household word all over the country. And when people learn that Mona died because of her daughter's neglect, they no longer return Joannie's phone calls, or send her invitations to their parties and balls. They reject her, not because she came from a poor home, but because, with arrogant pride, she was ashamed of her own mother.

Jesus was not ashamed of his grandmothers. And if our Savior counted among his lineage people who were aliens; if God's only-begotten Son was not ashamed of the Gentile grandmothers in his family tree, then we dare not discriminate against others on the basis of their ancestry or, for that matter, their race, color, gender, age, politics, clothing, language, or their bank balance. Here, on the very first page of the New Testament, where four Gentile women sit prominently on our Savior's family tree, every human prejudice stands condemned! For followers of Jesus, discrimination is never an option.

Again, we may be surprised to find these four women in Jesus' genealogy because there was something morally questionable about each of them. Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and tricked her father-in-law, Judah, into having intercourse with her. Rahab was the Jericho prostitute who hid the Hebrew spies during the invasion of Canaan. In her attempt to get Boaz to marry her, Ruth slipped into his bed while he was sleeping. And the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba, willingly gave herself to King David while her husband was still alive.

Matthew could have listed the four universally respected Hebrew matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, the wives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But instead he chooses four decidedly different matriarchs, and all four are morally suspect. Dale Bruner comments, "One gets the impression that Matthew pored over his Old Testament records until he could find the most questionable ancestors of Jesus available."

Why would he do that? When he could have chosen perfectly respectable matriarchs, why does he include this dubious quartet? Because, says Bruner, Matthew is preaching the gospel—the good news that God can overcome and forgive sin, that God can and does use soiled but repentant persons to do great things. Jesus came, not to seek and reward the righteous, because there aren't any. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, and the lost include Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, Tom, you, and every other person who has ever lived. The lost include the woman at the well. She had been married five times and was now living with a significant other, yet Jesus did not hesitate to accept her as she was so that she could become what she needed to be. (John 4) The lost include a woman caught in the act of adultery, to whom Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go and do not sin again." (John 8:11) The lost include the streetwalker who anointed Jesus with alabaster while he was a dinner guest in the home of a prominent Pharisee. And when the Pharisee criticized Jesus for letting her touch him, Jesus replied, "Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven." (Luke 7:47)

I'm reminded of Paul's admission, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." That's a huge inconsistency when you stop to think about it: treasure in a clay pot! Can you imagine a rational person mounting a fourteen-carat diamond on a Cracker Jack ring, or enclosing a Renoir in a cheap metal frame? Yet this is precisely what God does when he entrusts you and me with the good news of Jesus Christ. God puts treasure in earthen vessels. Don't ever say, "God can't use me. I'm not clever enough, I'm not smart enough, I'm not spiritual enough." Rather, it is our very emptiness that allows God to fill us with power; it is our very weakness that permits God to display strength; it is our memory of failure that creates understanding and compassion for others who, like us, need Christ's love and forgiveness.

Among the people who shaped my Christian faith there are a few eminent theologians and prominent preachers, but I'm most

grateful for a college student whose name I can't remember. She taught Vacation Bible School in our tiny country church when I was ten. Her lessons about five missionaries made a deep impression on me: William Carey, David Brainard, Hudson Taylor, David Livingston, and Mary Slessor. I cut continents out of cork and mounted them on heavy construction paper. I made tiny flags and stuck them into the cork where those missionaries served: India, China, Africa, and North America. And then and there I made up my mind that I would serve Christ wherever he sent me. I'll admit that I didn't want to be a missionary; that sounded too scary to a ten-year-old. Perhaps I could be a pastor like Joe Sanders who served our tiny church for so many years until the day of his death. Perhaps I could be a teacher like the young woman who taught that VBS class. I never expect to meet that woman again, but if I did I would tell her that she was the earthen vessel through whom God poured treasure into my life. She was the ordinary woman who pointed me toward this pulpit, and she had no idea she was doing it.

Like that young woman, like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, you and I are clay pots—often empty, chipped in places, and perhaps a bit lopsided. Which means we are perfect candidates for God's service! For God loves nothing more than to fill earthen vessels with treasure. I know that's true because once upon a time two thousand years ago, God filled a simple manger with the greatest treasure of all, his only begotten Son. And if a manger, why not you?