

Nov. 28, 2010; 1st Advent, Communion
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 1:1-6, 16
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Taking Root

INTRODUCTION TO GOSPEL:

The gospel reading today is the opening words of the New Testament. They come from the gospel of Matthew, which was written to a Jewish audience. The writer of this gospel wants the Jewish community to see Jesus as a continuation of and even culmination of Jewish history and God's covenant with the people. So he begins the genealogy with Father Abraham, the founding father of the Jewish people, and traces the lineage through King David, who was understood to have been anointed by God. The expectation was that the Messiah would come from this line.

SERMON:

One year when I was a young adult and we were having Thanksgiving Dinner at my maternal grandmother's, someone had made arrangements to have a family picture taken by a professional. This was not a typical occurrence for our family. However, the real reason I remember this occasion is because there is someone in that picture who is not part of our family tree. In fact, I don't remember his name. That was the only day I ever saw him. He was a foreign exchange student, from France I think, and someone had invited him to join us for dinner. So when it came time for a picture, it just seemed right to include him.

There are many interesting, and sometimes surprising, faces found in all family portraits and on family trees.

As we can see with today's gospel reading, interest in genealogy is not new. As the early church gave testimony to their conviction that Jesus was the Messiah, people asked, "So who is he? Who are his people? Where did he come from?" Imagine the competition for the first exclusive interview with members of his family. Imagine the book advances, the magazines spreads, the TV series, the blogs, etc. Thankfully, we do have four testimonies, four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), four stories that tell about Jesus, each told with a different slant.

As I mentioned earlier, the gospel of Matthew was particularly interested in Jesus' Jewish heritage and so Matthew traces Jesus' line, with all its interesting characters.

When families tell their stories it is usually the courageous and proud stories we tell. But there are always other stories that are part of our heritage as well, because... well... because people are people. At Jesus' multi-generational Thanksgiving Table described by Matthew, there are many interesting and complex characters. Here are a couple mentioned in the genealogy:

Trickster Jacob who cons his visually impaired father, Isaac, into giving Jacob the blessing that rightly belonged to his brother Esau.

Audacious Tamar, who when her father-in-law Judah refuses to marry her to the next son as custom demanded after her husband died, disguises herself like a 'woman of the night' and entices Judah into her tent. As a pledge for his payment she asks for his signet, cord, and staff. By morning she has disappeared but when three months later Judah learns that his daughter-in-law Tamar is pregnant, she sends him his very own signet, cord, and staff. Judah then has a change of heart and amazingly declares Tamar to be more in the right than himself.

I tell these stories to remind us that Jesus comes from real people, with and through whom God finds a way to work even though they are far from perfect. While Jesus is rooted in this long line of heritage, he isn't root bound. He takes wing in God's spirit.

As the prophet Isaiah puts it:
*The spirit of the Lord (rests) on him.
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and might,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear (the awesomeness) of the Lord.*

It is in that spirit that Jesus keeps adding more and more leaves to his Thanksgiving Table, to his Communion Table, to his everyday table. Others are welcome there, even if they are not part of the bloodline of his family. In the gospels we see him at table with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany; Mary Magdalene; Zaccheus; the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus' extended family portrait has many, many non-blood-line faces in it. Yours and mine for example.

As we begin this Advent season we might ask ourselves what spirit will be taking root in us and giving wing to us these next few weeks?

It is a question that calls for thoughtful reflection and then careful intention. For many of us will be tempted to a spirit of exhaustion and frustration feed by a sense of over commitment and consumerism. Others may be drawn into a spirit of despair and dejection in facing painful economic realities or deep family divisions.

May the spirit of the Lord rest upon us. The spirit that keeps expanding the family portrait and table to include – neighbors near and far – the hungry and the homeless, the mentally ill and the mentally weary, the disenfranchised and the disabled, the endangered animals and ecosystems, the world's war weary and the sick. What we need is the spirit of the knowledge of God.

Miriam Therese Winter in her poem "Root of Jesse" puts it this way:

*Root of Jesse
rising
from many an ancient prophecy*

*promised child
to all who would be reconciled
breaks through at last*

....
*Lord, you are stem, stalk, tree!
Let your fruit take root in me.*

(~*Imagining the Word*, V. 2 p. 85)

May it be so.