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**SUNDAY:** Christmas 1

**SERMON: Shady Ladies in the Messiah's Family Tree**

Text(s): Matthew 1:1-17

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We Americans appear to be particularly interested in tracing our ancestry and constructing our family trees. Perhaps it's because most of us came from somewhere else, and we don't have family lines or properties in this land that go back many hundreds of years, as do those who never emigrated from their homeland to the New World.

Here in Maine, it sometimes seems like about half the people one meets have a family name that can be traced back to the Mayflower and the other half to the French settlers of Quebec or Acadia.

The head usher in my congregation in France was the great-grandson of the last king of the west African country of Benin, formerly called Dahomey. Of course, when pressed, he would allow that being the great grandson of a king wasn't all that significant when the king in question had 52 wives and over 300 children. So when you got down to the great grandchildren, he was one of several thousand.

In all of our family trees, there are some people who are the source of pride down through the generations and others who are a source of embarrassment. Sometimes they're the same person. Some of us take delight in the fact that there are one or more rogues or rascals perched in the branches of our family tree, while others find it highly mortifying to discover an ancestor who wasn't a model of propriety or a good example of the highest of our values. In either case, that probably says more about us than about our ancestor.

When Carol's grandmother Nansy was still alive, whenever we got her talking about the family history, there was one of her sisters whom she rarely talked about, but when she did, she

always referred to her as "that Phoebe." Never just Phoebe, but always "that Phoebe." We eventually discovered that this particular great-aunt had been a bit of a rebel in her day and had run off back in the 1920's to seek her fortune in California, a real scandal at the time. She never found it, apparently, for she died fairly young, and the family had to pay to have her body shipped back to New Jersey for burial, probably another reason she would always be "that Phoebe," to Carol's grandmother.

Since most of us probably have a Phoebe somewhere in our family trees, it may not come as a total surprise that Jesus did also. What is surprising is that the author of this Gospel that stands first in our New Testament, should have chosen to make a big deal of it.

St. Matthew is the name traditionally given to this Gospel, but as in the case of all the Gospels, we really don't know who the author was. Whoever he may have been, he was almost certainly Jewish, and almost without doubt, a Jewish religious leader, well-schooled in the Torah and devoutly committed to the Jewish way of life and practice. He was also committed to the belief that Jesus was the Messiah hoped for and awaited by many faithful Jews like himself.

Unlike the other gospel writers, he opens his Gospel with a genealogy of Jesus the Messiah. Genealogies were very important in Jewish life and culture, and the Jewish scriptures that we refer to as the Old Testament, were full of them. Often we refer to them as "the begats," because in the old King James Version, that's the word that was used to translate the Hebrew term that means "was the father of." So and so begat so and so, who begat so and so. They're hardly ever read in public worship, because they're primarily of historical interest or political interest in establishing the ancestry of important people in the story.

But in Matthew's hands, the genealogy takes on a very different flavor, and it gives us a rather important clue to his agenda. His sources are the more complete genealogies in the Old

Testament books of Chronicles and Kings, as you can see for yourself if you're interested in going back and reading those "begats," but he introduces some changes that tell us what he's really about.

In the first place, he's setting the Messiah's ministry and mission in the context of the story of Israel's understanding of themselves as the chosen people of God. And he does this by tracing Jesus' ancestry to Abraham, the primal ancestor of Israel. (Luke, by contrast, traces Jesus' ancestry back to Adam, the primal human ancestor, in order to emphasize the universal nature of Jesus' significance.) Matthew's view is focused more closely on Israel's story and Jesus' place within it. His genealogy of Jesus is a theological genealogy as much as it is an historical genealogy.

Second, Matthew constructs this recital of Jesus' family tree in a way that is different from any other Jewish genealogical table that we know about, and certainly none of the others within the Bible. He identifies five women, including Jesus' mother, in this genealogy. Women were never mentioned in Hebrew genealogies, because descent was regarded through the male line. Normally, only the male ancestors are listed.

Not only does he include women, but these particular women are hardly the sort one would want to find perched on the branches of one's family tree. To put it bluntly, they're all women who have, or were accused of having, somewhat less than sterling reputations. And the stories about them in the Old Testament are pretty racy. But the very fact that Matthew starts his Gospel with them should clue us in to their importance.

The first he mentions is Tamar. We find her story back in Genesis 38. Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and the ancestor of the Tribe of Judah, the tribe from which King David, and now Jesus, have sprung.

Tamar had two strikes against her; first, she was not Jewish; she was a Gentile—she was from the Canaanite peoples who shared the land with the Israelites, but who did not share the worship of Israel's god. Second, she was part of a culture where widows had little or no place. If she was a young widow, as Tamar apparently was, and had not yet had children before her husband died, then under a tribal law called levirate marriage, her husband's brother was supposed to marry her and have children by her. The children, however, would still be considered the dead husband's children rather than the brother's children. This way, the inheritance laws wouldn't be messed up, and the dead husband's name would be carried on through the generations—the only real form of immortality in early Jewish religious belief. But her dead husband's brother refused to cooperate and do his duty, and so Tamar was left with nothing and no place to go and no one to protect or provide for her, and no one to carry on her husband's name and memory.

She appealed to her father-in-law Judah, chief of the clan, but he was too busy to bother and didn't do anything about it. So, she came up with a clever scheme to get the justice she needed for her dead husband. She dressed herself as a prostitute and put herself in Judah's path. Since it was the custom for women to be veiled, even prostitutes, when he came along and was enticed to go with her, he didn't know who it was he was with. He took his pleasure with her and then gave her his signet ring as a pledge of full payment later. Time went on, and Tamar discovered she was pregnant by her father-in-law, and when Judah was told that his widowed daughter-in-law was pregnant, he was about to have her killed as punishment for adultery. Yes, adultery—even though her husband was dead, she was not free to be with any other man than her husband's brother, who, of course had already refused his duty.

Anyway, to make a long story short, she

confronted Judah with the fact that he was the father of her baby, and told him that this was the only way she could carry on the family line of her husband. Judah was smitten with a guilty conscience and acknowledged that Tamar, a pagan Gentile, had been more honorable than he in upholding the Jewish marriage customs and inheritance law, so he recognized her child as his own and her as his surrogate wife. I imagine that for several generations after that, she was known by a lot of the family as “that Tamar.”

On we go to the next “shady lady” in Jesus’ family tree. Her name was Rahab, and she too was a Gentile pagan. When the Hebrews were fighting the Canaanites in order to settle into the land, they had to take the walled city of Jericho. Their leader Joshua sent spies in to scout out Jericho, and when they were in danger of being discovered, a prostitute named Rahab agreed to hide them in return for their pledge to spare her and her children when they took the city; normally the custom simply was to destroy everyone—women, children, men, everyone. The reason she gave was that she had concluded their God was the real God and so she wanted to be on the right side. The spies kept their promise, and Rahab eventually became assimilated into Israelite society and married a man named Salmon, who himself was the father of a man named Boaz, the grandfather of King David.

We meet Boaz in the story of the third “shady lady” in our lineup. Her story is told in in the Old Testament book named for her—the Book of Ruth. Ruth, too was a Gentile, from the territory of Moab, and she was the wife of an Israelite who also died young. Ruth distinguished herself in the pantheon of righteous Gentiles by choosing to stay with her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi (and I’ll forego the temptation to tell any jokes along those lines) and care for her. Her pledge to Naomi has become an unforgettable part of our religious heritage, and is even now used as a reading or song setting for many weddings.

*Wherever you go, I will go,  
And where you dwell, there will I dwell  
Your people shall be my people,  
And your God mine.*

*Where you die, I will die,  
And there will I be buried,  
And naught but death shall part you from me.*

Such an example of covenant faithfulness Ruth is, and how rightly she is honored in the scriptures. And, of course, that faithfulness resulted in her becoming the grandmother of King David, the royal ancestor of the Messiah. But it was her method of snagging Boaz as her husband, a scheme hatched by her mother-in-law, which, while it worked out in the end, made her appear as a prostitute in the eyes of others. Are we beginning to sense a theme here?

David himself, however, doesn’t fare as well in the righteousness department as his Gentile grandmother Ruth or his great-great grandmother Rahab the prostitute. For the big blot on the family escutcheon is one he put there when he had one of his military captains Uriah the Hittite murdered in cover up David’s violation of Uriah’s beautiful wife Bathsheba. Bathsheba herself was Jewish by birth, but because she was married to a Gentile, she (as was the custom) took on her husband’s ethnic identity, so she was a Gentile by assimilation. Since women were considered chattel, even in the eyes of others David’s real sin was not seen as being against Bathsheba herself but against her husband Uriah. David did eventually repent and make as much restitution for his crime as was appropriate for a king; he took Bathsheba into his harem and made her officially his wife, and she became the mother of Solomon, who succeeded David on the throne, thus making her a blood ancestor of Jesus, through Joseph, who was a descendant of the Davidic line.

Four women, all of them examples of covenant faithfulness to Israel’s God, despite the fact that, in the first place, they were Gentiles, and in the second place, prostitutes or viewed as

prostitutes by others.

And if all that weren't bad enough, to add insult to injury as it were, Mary, a devout and true daughter of Israel, is suddenly discovered by Joseph, her intended husband, to be pregnant, and he knows it's not by him. Matthew acknowledges this in the verses immediately following the genealogy, when he says that when Joseph discovered Mary's pregnancy, because he was a just man, and didn't want to expose her to public disgrace (and although he doesn't mention it, the very real possibility of being stoned to death for adultery), he married her and accepted the child as his own. He listened to his dreams in which he heard something of the value God placed on this child, and he was willing to risk being the butt of public gossip in order to do the right thing.

So, what's Matthew's point in rubbing the noses of his readers in the fact that the Messiah's family tree not only has five "shady ladies" in it, but in the case of four of them, Gentiles to boot?

Actually, I think he may have two points to make, both of them relevant to us:

First, as we see throughout Matthew's Gospel, and particularly when we get to the end, he's saying that God's saving love includes the whole world, and not just Israel. In the tradition of the great prophets Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah, Israel's distinctiveness was never due to the superiority of Israelites over all the other people around, even though that notion was embraced by many, if not most. Israel's distinctiveness was that it had been chosen by God to be the agents and witnesses to God's saving love for all humanity. So the Messiah, who has as bona fide Jewish credentials as it's possible to have—back to Abraham the patriarch and David the King no less—is the one who himself has Gentiles in his family tree. These Gentiles, though morally suspect, actually proved themselves more righteous than those whose bloodlines and religious credentials were purer.

And this same Messiah, now recognized as the Risen Lord, is the one who at the end of this Gospel will send out his followers telling them, "*Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all nations— all the Gentiles,— baptizing them, and teaching them everything that I have commanded you.*" Jesus, in Matthew's eyes, is the fulfillment of Israel's own identity and mission.

And the second point follows: don't underestimate the reality and power of God's providential involvement in, and guidance of, human history. Who could have dreamed that from these roots, from a group of "shady ladies," such good for the whole world could come. God can and does work, as St. Paul puts it, "*through what is weak and despised in the world,*" in order to accomplish the salvation of the world.

Ultimately, you see, it's not who's sitting in the branches of our family trees that really matters, whether heroes or hypocrites, royals or rascals; it's how we, regardless of our pedigrees or circumstances respond to the demands of our own particular moment with covenant faithfulness and with trust in a larger justice that we cannot yet see or realize. Do we, in the ordinary and often troubled circumstances of our lives, and with our limited vision, trust God enough to take some real risks of faith as these "shady ladies" did? Do we accept that the world is the way it is, and there's little we can do about it except to get by as comfortably as we can, or do we trust, as our faith tells us, that God's future for us and for the world is not death by global warming or nuclear holocaust, but life—the resurrection life of a new creation?