

December 1, 2019

“The Trouble With Christmas: Troubling Family Tree”

Matthew 1:1-17

[Matthew seeks to say at least three things in this genealogy. First of all, Matthew wants to ground the story of Jesus in actual history. This is not a fairy tale; a ‘once-upon-a-time in a land far, far away.’ Jesus really lived; had a real family tree. I’ll focus on a second message throughout the sermon, and end with what many believe is a third statement embedded in this seemingly boring list of names.]

Read Matthew 1:1-17

Do you have heroes in your family history? If so, do you find ways to tell people about them? Of course you do. Whether we’re conscious of it or not, when we’re getting to know someone and proud of the families we’ve come from, we end up dropping stories about them into the conversation. Sometimes this is overt; especially when our family heroes paint us in a better light. Sometimes it’s more subtle; but it still happens. When I first met Shelly, we both found ways to talk about our dads, the teams they coached, their winning ways, and their Christian faith. We didn’t talk much about the less exciting parts of our families. That came later.

Over the years, I’ve mentioned a bit about my family tree and without going into details and naming names this time, there are addictions to alcohol, pornography, and gambling. There has been very hurtful adultery, anger issues erupting at family gatherings, and one aunt who struggled with agoraphobia. I’m very proud of my family, but there is clear brokenness throughout the generations which I didn’t talk so much with Shelly about when we were first dating.

Are there any shady characters in your lineage? Do you ever talk about them?

Is there an aunt with mental health issues or an abusive uncle in your father’s family?

Any members of the Ku Klux Klan? Any convicted felons?

How about your immediate family? Are there any scandals or secrets or skeletons?

Are you proud or embarrassed about your heritage?

Or a little of both?

Our scripture reading this morning isn’t what you’d call a ‘page turner.’ Reading a list of names – of who ‘begat’ who – isn’t most people’s idea of a good time. Some of you are more interested in genealogy than others, but few of us turn to the beginning of Matthew for our morning devotions. Birth narratives weren’t uncommon in the Ancient Near East of Jesus’ day. In fact, famous people and ancient gods had their lineages recorded to prop up their status as leaders and deities. Genealogies were carefully crafted (make that embellished and altered) to make a

person's pedigree as impeccable as possible. But what we have in Matthew's beginning is different; it's peculiar; it's troubling.

It starts with just 8 words, which are literally translated, "The book of the genesis (beginning) of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham." The mention of both David and Abraham connect the reader to the two greatest promises of God in the Old Testament. The promise to David was that he would have a son who'd be king forever. And the promise to Abraham is that his family would be a blessing for everyone.

As I said before, if we wanted to tell people about Jesus and where He came from (WHO He was connected to), we'd probably start with David and Abraham. It would reflect well on Him and – if we were trying to look good – on us as well.

And it starts off with a pretty well-known family tree; although there are plenty of family issues with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Actually, the family tree gets pretty weird, pretty quickly. By verse 3 we are reminded of Judah and "Tamar" and a rather disturbing story of sexual deviancy by both. You can read about it in Genesis 38. It's not the kind of family story most people would have included in the first place, let alone brought up again while trying to prop up Jesus at the beginning of His story.

By verse 5 "Rahab" is listed. She's pretty heroic, saving from certain death the Israelite spies who were sent by Joshua into Jericho. But if you know the story in Joshua 2 you also remember she's a prostitute. Not only is she mentioned in Jesus' genealogy – a non-Jew mind you – but she's listed in the "Faith Hall of Fame" in Hebrews 11 (v.31). Speaking of foreigners, "Ruth" is mentioned in verse 5 as well. She's a Moabite who loses her Israelite husband to an early death, returns with her mother-in-law – Naomi – to Bethlehem at the end of a famine, and marries the son of Rahab, named Boaz. If you read the Book of Ruth (chapters 1-4) you can see how this all plays out in a rather aggressive (many would say sexual) move on her part. All three women so far don't fit a 'squeaky clean' profile, do they? Two of them are foreigners. But this trend continues.

Ruth and Boaz are the great grandmother/grandfather of King David – so that's pretty cool. But halfway through verse 6 we are reminded of one of David's worst moments: when he committed adultery with the "Wife of Uriah" (Bathsheba is not directly named) and killed her husband to cover his tracks. (See 2 Samuel 11) From that scandal, Solomon is born. And this is all before we get to the Babylonian captivity in v. 11 – one of the lowest moments in Israelite history.

It goes a little quicker from verses 12-15. Not too many familiar names or stories here, other than a few not-so-great leaders. But then in verse 16 we read that Jesus' mother was "Mary," an unwed teen who got pregnant before Joseph and her were married. [We'll read more about the

troubles they faced in the next few weeks.] This family tree is a mixed bag at best. If we're honest, it's a little troubling.

Like other great men and women, Jesus comes from a long line of people who were courageous and flawed, faith-filled and rather questionable. His is an ancestry filled with ups and downs, highs and lows, golden moments and glaring embarrassments. It's a much longer discussion to look at some of the other names, but some of His relatives were left out of this genealogy while others were penciled in as a sort of substitute. Some are named directly, and others are only alluded to. Many of His ancestors were unknown but some were world famous. Matthew tells the story of Jesus by first telling us about His troubling family tree.

What's Matthew trying to say and do with this genealogy?

What are we supposed to see in Jesus' lineage in the midst of what is quite troubling?

Anyone remember what Matthew did before he started following Jesus? (He was a tax collector.) And who did tax collectors typically associate with? (Sinners) "Tax collectors and sinners" were synonymous in Jesus' day. Talk about a questionable bunch! Matthew's crowd probably added some trouble and embarrassment to their own family trees. That's where Matthew was coming from as he tells the story of Jesus, beginning with this list of names. I think Matthew wants to declare to us at the very beginning of his gospel that God brings redemption to some of the most unlikely people, in the most unlikely places, at the most unlikely times; and He does so with precision and particularity. In His sovereignty God redeems people from their broken and quirky and troubled family trees. Some of us are living proof.

But in reality, it's not just certain aunts and uncles and sons and daughters and parents on our family trees who are marred and scarred. Our ultimate problem is not our particular family tree, but the lineage we're all a part of – a family that traces itself all the way back to the Garden of Eden, and our first earthly parents – Adam and Eve. [Luke's genealogy follows Mary's family back to Adam in Luke 3.]

In Adam we all have this tendency to bend our lives away from God and His will. In Adam we all have reasons to cover up. In Adam we all stand in need of redemption. But the Good News of the Gospel (Matthew's, Mark's, Luke's, and John's) is that Jesus has come as a sort of Second Adam to save and welcome us into a new family; a family filled with 'used-to-be sinners' who have been declared saints. When Christ was born into the world, He came to turn all of our family trees upside down so that He could become the Source of our identities. Christ came to set us free from the secrets and skeletons in our lives we haven't even shared with our own families yet. Christ came to adopt us into His forever family.

I'm guessing many of you spent – and will spend – extended time with your families over the holidays. Some of this may be hitting close to home. Some of you may be recovering from a very difficult Thanksgiving dinner, or extended family visit. Part of what we do in our Emotionally Healthy Spirituality course is address our families in the context of scripture and prayer. We are encouraged to identify and name the people and parts of our family systems that are broken and have been perpetuated; passed down from one generation to the next. But we are also reminded we're not bound to follow in the ways of our families forever. We don't have to be stuck but can be set free!

Here's what Pete Scazzero, the co-founder of EHS, reminds us in his book: "The great news of Christianity is that your family of origin does not determine your future. God does! What has gone before you is not your destiny! The most significant language in the New Testament for becoming a Christian is 'adoption into the family of God.' When we place our faith in Christ, we are spiritually reborn by the Holy Spirit into the family of Jesus." (*Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, by Peter Scazzero)

As we prepare to celebrate Christ's first arrival (first Advent) – including the troubled family line He came from – let's not think that who we have become up to this point in our lives is who we are destined to be at the very end of our days. Because of Jesus, our families do not have to define us. And because of Jesus we have a big family full of orphans and outsiders, prophets and priests, women of ill-repute and men who utterly failed, who have been adopted and made right because of this babe born in Bethlehem. And that should help us be less troubled and anxious, and more rested.

And speaking of rest, the third message many think Matthew is communicating at the end of this genealogy has to do with the ultimate Sabbath rest. Instead of seeing 3 segments of 14 generations, some biblical scholars have preferred to break it into 6 segments of 7. We know that 7 is a perfect number of completion in the Hebrew mindset. After 6 days of creation, God rested on the 7th. After 6 years of working the land, the Israelites were commanded to let the ground rest for the 7th year. It is possible that Matthew is inferring that Jesus is inaugurating a 7th season of 7's, which points to The Year of Jubilee – when all debts are forgiven and all land returned to its original owners.

As we celebrate communion on this first Sunday of Advent, let us remember the words of Jesus: "Come, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and you will find rest for your souls." He doesn't want us to be troubled, by our families or anything else. He wants us to be free!