

If I were to ask you to tell me the story of your life, where would you begin? Would you start with when you were born? Would you begin with your parents? How many of you would begin with your grandparents, your great-grandparents, or your great-great grandparents? Many of us in this country have very little knowledge of our family histories beyond two generations. Who were my ancestors before immigrating here from Finland and Germany in the early 20th century? Why did they come? What was life like before they left? I have scraps of information, but little more. Many of us have ancestors who came to this country in search of a better life. Some of us have ancestors brought here in chains, with their histories intentionally erased. The same has been attempted with the native populations who were here long before the rest of us. How we tell the story of our lives is never simple. Do we tell a story of our virtues and our triumphs or a story of our faults and traumas? What if there's room for both?

When Matthew begins his gospel, he begins with a genealogy, which seems dull to us, but it was a common practice in ancient literature. When you wanted to demonstrate your bona fides and show the legitimacy of your greatness in the ancient world, you started with your family tree. Matthew begins: **“A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.”** Matthew wants us to believe that Jesus is a legitimate heir to King David and a son of Father Abraham. David, flawed though he was, was Israel's greatest king, the one by whom all other kings were measured. By the end of the Old Testament, the line of kings had long since failed. Israel was under Roman control, and Rome didn't want a Davidic king but instead wanted a stooge like Herod who ruled not with justice and peace, but with violence and tyranny. The promise of a Davidic king is the promise of peace, the kind that Isaiah prophesied about where swords are beaten into plowshares, and people no longer learn to make war. After another week of mass shootings, I'm ready for that kingdom to come.

Amidst that long list of names in Matthew's genealogy, a few of them stand out as extraordinary. There are four women included, and their presence is unexpected. **[Genealogy of Christ painting.]** If a genealogy is meant to demonstrate one's legitimacy and greatness, the four women you would expect to be included are Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. These are the four great matriarchs of Israel's story, yet they are absent. Instead, Matthew includes Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. There must be something about these women's stories that Matthew wants to uplift.

Matthew tells us that “Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.” Judah you may recall is one of the 12 tribes of Israel from whom King David would descend. In Revelation, Jesus is called “the lion of Judah,” so Judah is important, and he fathered Perez and Zerah with Tamar. But Tamar wasn't Judah's wife. She was his daughter in law. Judah's son who was married to Tamar had died, and then she married Judah's other son who also died. Judah then promised Tamar that when his third son came of age, she could marry him, but he never kept that promise. Tamar deceives Judah and ends up tricking him into impregnating her. When Judah finds out what happened, he says that she is more righteous than him. It's all very dramatic and soap opera like, and you can read about it in Genesis 38. But it makes you wonder why Matthew would go out of his way to include Tamar? Isn't that a family story you'd like hidden, not highlighted?

What about the other three women? Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute that gave shelter to Joshua and the other Israelite spies in Joshua 2—again not someone we would expect to be included in a royal genealogy. Ruth is a Moabite who saves her mother-in-law by boldly

proposing marriage to Boaz, and she ends up being King David's great-grandmother. The fourth woman included isn't named but you might know who she is, "**David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.**" Do any of you remember Solomon's mother's name? Bathsheba. Bathsheba was married to Uriah the Hittite who had been one of King David's mightiest warriors. While Uriah is out fighting for his king, David impregnates Bathsheba and ends up having Uriah killed to try and cover his tracks. When David's lies are exposed, the child he conceives with Bathsheba dies. David then takes her as one of his many wives, and eventually she gives birth to Solomon—another story of trauma and shame that Matthew uplifts.

None of these women's stories are what we would think to include if the goal is to demonstrate Jesus' legitimacy and greatness, yet Matthew goes out of his way to make room for them. Why? Two of the four women are Gentile converts, Ruth and Rahab. Uriah was also a Gentile, so perhaps Bathsheba was as well. In some pre-Christian literature, even Tamar is named a Gentile. Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels, yet here in chapter 1, he is letting us know that this Jesus' story isn't just for Jews. There's room here for Gentiles as well, which means there's room for us all. In our world of racial and ethnic division, that is profoundly good news. With rising nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and systemic racism, it is good news to know that God doesn't belong to any one race, or country, not even one religion. The story of Jesus is good news for all, for Jews, for Gentiles, for people who think they belong and for people who we assume could never belong. There's room for every story.

But it's not just race and ethnicity that's on Matthew's mind. By including Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba, Matthew is letting us know that **the family of God is a no-shame zone**. Last week, we were blessed to hear from a graduate of CATCH Court, which is the city of Columbus' special court docket for women arrested for solicitation who instead of doing jail time are given the opportunity to build a life of recovery and freedom. CATCH Court is a no-shame zone, where women who might otherwise think they are unworthy of love and belonging are instead embraced by a community of rehabilitation. Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba all have stories we might consider shameful, yet Matthew proudly includes them in Jesus' family tree. Why would he do that except to let us know that there's room for your shame-story as well. We all have them. I certainly do. But nothing that you've done and nothing that has been done to you can ever make you unworthy of God's love. Those parts of your life that you think would make others reject you, God does not. One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is Hebrews 2:11, which says, "The one who makes people holy and the people who are being made holy all come from one source. That is why Jesus isn't ashamed to call them brothers and sisters." You may think of yourself as anything but holy, yet you are not what makes you holy. God does that, and for that reason, Jesus isn't ashamed to call you his sibling. There's room for your story too.

In case you think I'm making that up, did you notice the last verse of our reading? Matthew concludes the family tree by saying, "**There were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to Babylon to the Christ.**" Nice symmetry there—3 sets of 14, but what's interesting is that if you count all the names, the third set has only 13, even though Matthew says there are 14. Do you think he just can't add? No, he leaves a space, so that you can put your name here as well. That's the whole point. There's room for every story here, no matter who you are, what you've done, where you were born, what your skin color is, or who

you love. In the no-shame zone of Jesus' family tree, you belong here, and the very things you think might exclude you become instead shining examples of your belonging. In your greatest failures, and your deepest shame, you are worthy of love and have your place in this family tree. When you tell the story of your life, you can include all of it, the virtues and the triumphs, the trauma and the shame. All of it belongs, which means all of you belongs. Jesus isn't ashamed to call you his sibling. There's room in this story for you.