

BLACK SHEEP IN THE FAMILY
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
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Genesis 38:11-19, 24-26
Joshua 2:1-21¹
Matthew 1:1-6, 12-16

It's no wonder that the story of Tamar is not included in the series of texts from the three-year lectionary. For one thing, it is an obscure story, based on the unfamiliar custom of Levirate marriage, which held that if a woman's husband died, the dead husband's brother was obliged to marry the widow and care for her. It's not exactly the way we do things in our world.

But the greater problem with Tamar is that she resorts to prostitution. She pretends she is a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law Judah. When Tamar's first husband died, Judah had promised her that if she would wait for his young son Shelah to grow up, she would become his wife.

So Tamar waited, but nothing happened. So Tamar took matters into her own hands. She took off her widow's robes and gussied herself up in a mini-skirt and halter top, and waited by the road for Judah to come along. When Judah approached, he did not recognize her as his daughter-in-law, but simply as a practitioner of the world's oldest profession. The two of them came to an agreement, and to the price to be paid for—shall we say—services rendered. The price that Tamar required for her services was a lamb, and as security until the lamb was delivered, Tamar took Judah's ring and cord and staff as a sort of collateral.

From this encounter Tamar becomes pregnant. Judah, learning of it, thinks that she has been out on the loose, and orders that she be burned for her immorality. But Tamar outmaneuvers him: "The person who got me pregnant," she says, "is the one who gave me these." And she produces the ring, the cord, and the staff. Judah realizes that he doesn't come off looking too good himself. In fact, he says, "she is more right than I,

¹ This sermon is a part of a series based on texts which do not appear in the Revised Common Lectionary.

since I did not give her the son I had promised.” Tamar took matters into her own hands to get what she wanted.

You can see why this story is not included in the lectionary. It is complicated, and on a moral level about equivalent to Playboy Magazine. You can be sure that when folks say we need to return to the family values of the Bible, the story of Tamar is not what they have in mind.

We have followed this story with another about another practitioner of the world’s oldest profession. This one is Rahab. Her name in Hebrew means “wide, expansive,” which conveys its own meaning. She is the one who hides the Israelites who have come to Jericho to spy on the place in preparation for conquering the city. Rahab hides them from those who were seeking to put them to death. So, when they depart, they tell her to remain with her family in the house, and to tie a bright scarlet cord on the window to mark the house. That way, the promise, when the Israelites invade the city, they will see the scarlet cord and spare Rahab and her family. (Incidentally, it is this scarlet cord that is the origin of areas of prostitution as the “red light district.”)

Seduction, incest, prostitution, red light districts: This is not why you came to church today! Tamar and Rahab are two not very savory characters seemingly picked at random from the Bible. Their stories are separated by several books of the Bible and by several hundred years. They seem to have nothing in common except for their immoral behavior.

Oh yes, they do have one other thing in common: Their names are mentioned together in a passage in the New Testament. Matthew’s gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus, the list of Jesus’ ancestors. It begins like this:

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab (hang in there!), and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

At least we’ve heard of David, but let’s skip down to the end of the list:

. . . Matthan [was] the father of Jacob,
and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born,
who is called the Messiah.

Tamar and Rahab are great-great-great grandmothers of Jesus our Lord. Jesus has in his lineage two prostitutes, two black sheep in the family. Tamar and Rahab are ancestors of our Lord.

It should not be too surprising, then, that Jesus goes sort of easy on prostitutes. The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree. He is descended from prostitutes, and he is strikingly gentle and non-judgmental with women of his day in similar circumstances.

A woman is caught in adultery, and everybody is ready to stone her to death. But Jesus says to them: "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." And to the woman, one we would classify as immoral, he says, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."²

When Jesus is eating at the home of a Pharisee, a woman who is probably a prostitute comes in and weeps over Jesus in anticipation of his death. Her tears fall on Jesus' feet, and she wipes them with her hair. The pharisaic host is appalled, but Jesus commends her. "Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she has shown great love."³

We still live in a world where folks are quick to divide people into those who are moral and those who are immoral. And when Christians speak of morality, they often mean "sexual morality." Never mind sins of greed or prejudice or sloth—it's sex we have on our mind. We live in the day of a new Puritanism, where some live in the constant fear that someone somewhere might be having a good time, and getting away with it.

Medical researchers have developed a new, almost miraculous vaccine which prevents cervical cancer in women. It is being recommended that young girls be given the vaccine before they reach puberty. The vaccine is being hailed as a great advance in the fight against cancer. Yet some religious groups oppose the giving of this vaccine, for fear that it might cause young girls to be more sexually promiscuous! The attitude almost seems to be—they wouldn't put it this way, of course—is that if they are going to be sexually immoral, they need to pay the price!

Yet Jesus has surprisingly little to say about sex. If anything, Jesus is much more casual about issues of sexuality than his followers are. By the rigid sexual standards of our day, he is lax toward loose women, ho-hum toward harlots.

² John 8:1-11.

³ Luke 7:36-50.

Instead, Jesus has a great deal to say about things we don't talk about as much. He says a lot about how we use our money: "You cannot serve God and money." He shows concern for the poor, the outcast. He challenges our poisonous class-consciousness: "The first shall be last, and the last first." He rails against the people who think they are upstanding, upright, the uptight, always right Presby— Pharisees of his day, and ours.

While we are off making our distinctions between the moral and the immoral, Jesus distinguishes between righteous and the unrighteous. There are those who are so convinced of their goodness that they don't think they much have need of Jesus. And there are those who see themselves as sinners, and cast themselves on the mercy of God.

When Jesus said: "Tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you"⁴ the "you," means "you!"⁵

To the virtuous, the respectable people, those who consider themselves moral, these ancient stories of Rahab and Tamar come as a warning. Beware when we think we have achieved a level of perfection that gives us good standing in the eyes of God. Of course we want to have the love of God. But, Lord, if you don't mind, we'd also like to hold onto our status, our superior moral standing, our agendas and timetables. Those who pray that prayer have their reward.

The sinners who came to Jesus—harlots, outcasts, riff-raff—knew they had nothing. They cast themselves on the mercy of Christ. "Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling."

That's who is sitting at this table: sinners, those who know they have nothing except what Jesus gives. And the host at this table understands, for he himself has sinners in his ancestry.

Give it up, friends. You don't have to prove anything to anyone. Jesus loves you, just as you are. His words to the woman are also to us: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."✠

⁴ Matthew 21:31.

⁵ Peter J. Gomes, *Strength for the Journey* (HarperSanFrancisco 2003), p. 126.