

The Friend of Sinners

(Matthew 1:1-17 – December 20, 2020)

Hello, and welcome to *Voice of the Church*. We've been looking for the last 2 weeks at Christ's genealogy in Matthew 1. A "multi-faceted diamond" in which every angle highlights some aspect of who Christ is and what he's come to do. We've seen that he's the Son of David, whose heavenly kingdom has no end. He is the Son of Abraham, whose kingdom has a universal reach. And, now, we see that he's also the "friend of sinners."

I mentioned last week how genealogies in ancient times did not generally include women. And, so, when Matthew includes 4 of them, we take note... And we talked about how the women mentioned are Gentiles, suggesting the worldwide scope of Christ's mission, which Matthew unfolds in his gospel.

But the church father Jerome thought there might have been *another* reason why Matthew includes these women. Not simply because they're Gentiles (although that's part of it), but also because they're sinners. And not just *sinner*s in the sense that "ALL of us are sinners," but "sinners" in the way the gospel-writers often speak of Jesus as "dining with tax collectors and sinners." Those notorious for public, scandalous sin, often involving sexual misconduct... Jerome said *that's* the kind of people Jesus came to save, & *that's* why these women are highlighted. *To anticipate the 'sinners' of Matthew 1:21 whom Christ came to save!* Or of Matt. 9, of whom Christ says, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners!"

And, so, it's worth exploring whether Jerome might've been onto something... Each of these women either sinned sexually, or were, in some sense, *regarded* as sinners. You remember the story of Tamar in Gen. 38. There was a man named *Judah*, who, after he & his brothers sold Joseph into slavery, "went down into the region of the Canaanites & took a wife" (already, that's not something he's supposed to be doing).

And he and his wife have 3 *sons*, the first of which takes a wife named Tamar. But it tells us that God strikes him down, because he's "wicked." So, the 2nd son is told to take Tamar as a wife so he can raise up a child for his late brother. And he gladly *takes* Tamar for himself, but then he goes and takes precautions to make sure they can't have a child... So, God strikes him down as well.

Now, the youngest son of Judah would be next in line to take Tamar as his wife, but he's too young, so Judah says to her, "Go, remain in your father's house as a widow, 'til my son is of age..." Gen. 38:11 suggests that he does this out of fear that she's 'bad luck' or 'cursed;' in other words, he's *oblivious* to the fact that his two sons are the evil ones... So, she's sent away to live as a widow with no husband or sons to care for her, & she's unable to *marry*, because she would've been required by Law only to marry this younger brother once he's old enough. But Judah has no intention of giving his youngest son to Tamar. So, what he's doing is *cruel*.

And she *recognizes* this, & concocts a plan, when Judah goes up to the sheep-shearing festival sometime later, to follow him there, dress up as a temple-prostitute, & engage Judah as a client... This is one of the most scandalous passages in all the Bible. Judah doesn't recognize her. He goes on to lie with her. And later on, when he finds out his daughter-in-law is *pregnant*, he wants to **burn** her... Until she reveals who the father is... At which point his mouth is shut, & she ends up giving birth to twins, Perez and Zerah – the first of which is part of the line of Christ. It's sort of a *scandalous* family-tree...

Or you can think Rahab... Unlike Tamar, she hasn't engaged in immorality just once out of a sense of desperation, but is a more *blatant* transgressor; it is her occupation! She has, in some sense, *chosen* a life of prostitution. And, so, we have in Rahab a "Canaanite prostitute," about as despicable a character as anyone in the OT could imagine... *Christ's genealogy is not one any of us would be proud to claim...*

Ruth & Bathsheba are also included... Bathsheba is the wife of Uriah... V. 6 actually doesn't even mention her by name, but simply says, "David was the father of Solomon by the wife of *Uriah...*" In other words, *the wife who belonged to Uriah David stole for himself, impregnated* (either willingly, or more likely **coercion** [*as I don't know she would've had a choice*]), and then he killed her husband... Any husband listening knows what a *wicked, wicked* sin David commits... And yet, *David*, the murderous-adulterer who abuses his authority, and Bathsheba, the object of his lust, are both included in the line of Christ.

And, then, in v. 5, we have *Ruth*, who I saved for last as she's the one who it's least clear whether she sinned sexually... You know the story, Ruth Ch. 3, Naomi (her mother-in-law) conjures a plan to have Ruth go in the *dark* of night, *anointed* with perfume, to the man, Boaz, who after he's done drinking & goes to sleep, she'll lay at the foot of his bed & 'uncover his feet.'

Now, the passage does not explicitly describe any impropriety, but it certainly leaves the reader with a sense that something more might have been going on... She goes “in the dark of night.” She is a Moabitess. And she waits ‘til he’s had his fill of good drink. Which reminds us of Gen. 19, where the Moabite line *begins* with Lot’s daughters getting him *drunk* & “lying with him in his sleep.” And, so, we have an interesting parallel that might be suggestive... And the phrase “to uncover his feet” is often used as a euphemism for more than just feet...

Now, ultimately, I don’t think anything happens between the two of them (they both seem to be commended as virtuous), but all of these details certainly make the reader suspicious... In fact, we might say the suspicion surrounding Ruth & Boaz *anticipates* the suspicion that arises when *Mary* gets pregnant out of wed-lock...! And, so, what we have, here, is a family-line that is filled with all sorts of checkered pasts – women who’ve sinned *sexually*, who’ve been *suspected* of sinning sexually, or who’ve been *victimized* sexually. And Christ comes to **identify** with them! He does not hide these skeletons in his closet, but he hangs them up on his wall for all to see...

Do you see what Matthew’s telling us? You may be listening, & you’ve committed unspeakable sins. Maybe, like Rahab, they’re sexual; maybe they’re not. And you find yourself wondering whether God’s grace could extend even to someone like you... *But why not?* If Christ claims prostitutes as his own, *why not YOU?* As the old hymn says, “Jesus sinners doth receive!” He is the one who Isaiah says, was “numbered with transgressors.” Come to him; he’ll have you!

Or *maybe*, like Bathsheba (or even in some sense, Tamar) you’ve been forced to do something that’s despicable. You’ve been *victimized*. You’ve been mistreated. You’ve been asked to participate in things that make you feel dirty & make you feel guilty... *Christ comes to identify with you in your shame*... Isn’t that what he’s doing as he welcomes these people into his family line...? *Isn’t that what he’s doing as he hangs naked, on a Roman cross*...? Christ **identifies** with you in your shame & victimization...

Or, maybe like *Ruth*, you’re a noble & virtuous woman. But that’s not stopped people from *saying* things about you, just as it didn’t stop people from saying things about Mary... *But you know what?* Neither did it stop them from saying things about Christ... They called him a glutton and a drunkard. They watched *suspiciously* as he treated women with love & dignity. They made up claims that he was a blasphemer... Christ is THE chief example of being a victim of slander & gossip.

And, so, maybe you're listening, and that's you. *You've done nothing wrong, but that's not stopped people from pointing the finger! And now you feel like you're all alone!*" But you're not... Here Christ comes to identify with you.

Do you see what an *encouragement* this genealogy is? Whether you've committed great sin, whether you've been a victim of someone *else's* sins, or whether you've been falsely accused of sin, **Christ will have you!** And, so, the message of Christmas, the message of this genealogy is not only that Christ has come into the world, but that he's come to save sinners & sufferers like you and like me. He's come to save those who've been ravaged by the sins of others, or filled with guilt because of their own. And he says, "Come, I will take your shame. Come, I am a friend of sinners." He says that to you today. By grace, he will wash you of your sins & shame as you look to him in faith, the friend of sinners... That's what Christmas is all about, the friend of sinners... Thank you for listening, and may God bless you.