

Family Stories
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 2:1-5
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 1:1-17

I believe I have shared with you that my family's Missouri origins were a consequence of that being where my great-great grandfather was thrown off a train for being drunk. In the book recounting the tales of that branch of my family tree, it is said of Martin Van Buren Harris that through most of his life, he was a very wicked man with a terrible temper. His second wife, Martha, the niece of his deceased first wife, said their life together was, while prosperous, very unhappy.

Yet, Martha was no shrinking violet. She had previously been engaged to a Mr. Harrison, but her family forced her to break the engagement because they did not consider Mr. Harrison to be their social equal. Of course, having experienced the alarming volatility of Martin during his marriage to Martha's aunt, they were none too pleased when Martin began courting Martha. In fact, everybody in Martha's family had long been afraid of Martin. However, Martha Elizabeth Ann Brown decided that since she could not marry the man she loved, she would marry Martin Harris to show him that there was one Brown he could not abuse (*You know, your basic*

solid foundation for any marriage). Given that Martin had previously stabbed her uncle, debilitating him for life, Martha had her work cut out for her.

Three weeks after the wedding, when Martin threw a temper tantrum, Martha picked up a dining chair and told him to get out of the house. He fled. He may have been combustible, but he wasn't stupid. On another occasion, Martin complained about the coffee, so Martha picked up the saucer and cup, filled to the brim with hot coffee, and threw the whole thing in his face. Once, when Martin objected to her decision to discipline their son, my great-grandfather Leslie, Martha picked up a buggy whip, striking Martin with the heavy end, just above the ear, and knocking him out cold. She then finished her business with her son before attending to Martin.

And get this, their daughter, who would be my great aunt, said there were innumerable other stories from her parents' stormy marriage that she didn't want printed in a book during her lifetime. After reading what she **did** share, you have to wonder what was so much worse that she didn't want it mentioned?

She did say, however, that three years before his death, Martin converted to Martha's strict Baptist faith and they, purportedly found their marital bliss. Of course, I'm left with the dilemma of what to be more disturbed by: the impact of their anger and volatility, or the fact that when Martin converted, he chose to be a Baptist.

Needless to say, when colleagues speak of being the product of five or six generations of preachers, my call story has a distinctly different flavor. And yet, somehow, our stories came together in the same place, the church. One novelist said, "You are born into your family and your family is born into you. No returns. No exchanges." (Elizabeth Berg) Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested, "Every man is a quotation from all his Ancestors."

And so it is. Research in genetics has revealed how all living things share a common family tree. DNA ties us all together, and if you go back far enough that common ancestry includes Spongebob, Dorie, and Charlie the Tuna, and prior to that, the migrating dust from faraway galaxies, the molecules of which can be found in your fingernails and ankle bones. As I have said many times, there is no such thing as a self-made person. You are the product of all that came before. Of course, on a theological level, the

biblical authors understood this before the research caught up. Matthew opens his gospel with a word that shares the same root with the first book of the Pentateuch, Genesis - origin, beginning, source. From that root we get *genealogy*.

Matthew says, An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. And with those words, centuries have immediately tuned out as if prompted by a trigger to fall asleep. You know what no church member has said to a preacher ... ever? "Could we do a study of the genealogies of the Bible?" Not once. That's a shame, because particularly here in Matthew, the genealogy has a massive theological significance.

"Matthew's genealogy includes 42 names, organized in 3 sets of 14: there were 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from David to the Babylonian exile, and 14 generations from the exile to Jesus." While scholars debate what that formula implies, it reveals Jesus to be the culmination of God's promises to Israel while also making it clear that God's sovereignty, concern, and love extends to all creation. Yes, that the list of names begins with Abraham, and not Adam, or Eve, or Noah, does signify

God's particular interest in what would become Israel, but as it also becomes clear in the genealogy, the intention of God's movement within Israel has a redemptive purpose for those outside of Israel, too. Israel was not the end, but the means of God's saving work. We should remember that Abraham was himself a gentile when God called him and Sarah to leave Haran, and that it would be through them that all the peoples of the earth would find, not their destruction, but their blessing. The purpose of Jesus' genealogy here being more theological than historical, not all generations are listed, yet the names that are included signify the radical inclusiveness of our Lord.

Consider the dramatic stories of courage and intention highlighting three gentile women whose names, against all expectations, wind up as essential figures in the genealogy of Jesus. At a minimum, their stories should have put to rest all notions of gender-based limits on leadership and authority. Their stories include trauma, triumph, foresight, savvy, persistence, and ingenuity in ways that move the larger narrative of God's purposes forward. It wasn't that God scripted their odysseys or invoked their tribulations, but that through them God would not let the thread of his ultimate promises break.

Tamar, the Canaanite widow of Judah's eldest son, was left without resources after her husband's death because Judah failed to follow through on the commitment necessary for her wellbeing. Tradition would have called for one of Judah's other sons to take her in and provide her with an heir. However, the sons refused daddy's requests. Yet, with marked ingenuity, Tamar formed a most creative, albeit R-rated, plan to force the negligent Judah to uphold his responsibility, thus moving the story of God's redemption forward. Read the story in Genesis and you'll understand why I laugh when you complain about the Bible being just a boring bunch of begats.

How about Rehab? Don't forget that the economic and cultural injustices of the time severely limited the ways a single woman could pursue a living. Rahab, also a gentile, was a prostitute living in the fortress of Jericho, a primary obstacle that had to be overcome in order for the Israelites to stake their claim on the promised land. When Joshua sent two spies on a clandestine mission inside Jericho in order to gain intel prior to their invasion, the spies found refuge at the home of Rahab. She made a deal with the spies that would protect her family after the invasion, but that meant putting her own life at risk as she deceived the king in order to

provide cover for the spies, allowing them to escape. The story plays out like a scene from a James Bond flick. Jericho's walls come tumbling down, but not before Rehab and her whole family find refuge with the Israelites. Suspense. Intrigue. Spy craft. Shrewdness. And the thread of God's promise remains unbroken, as the broken and flawed children of Creation answer the call of God in ways beyond their own understanding.

Consider Ruth, a Moabite, i.e., a gentile. There are no kings, wars, or miracles to be found in the book of Ruth, just the trials of ordinary people trying to navigate their way through the difficult circumstances of cultural differences, famine, and the death of spouses that came far too early, leaving two women to find their way in a time when society offered little support or possibility for widows. Once, again wit, grit, and a bit of audacity provided a framework in which the spirit of God could push through any deterrence to redeem lives and move the promises and purposes of God forward to a great-grandchild of Ruth named David, the son of a shepherd, who would one day lead Israel as king.

Tamar. Rahab. Ruth. Three names in a list of 42. But a name is never just a name, is it? Poet W. H. Auden suggested that, "Proper names are

poetry in the raw. Like all poetry they are untranslatable." Did you know that there are over a thousand Marys for every 100,000 Americans? I've been a pastor for over 35 years, and I still struggle to differentiate the various Marys in the Gospels. And yet, if your name is Mary, there is no other Mary just like you. Sure, no one would confuse Mary Queen of Scots with Mary J. Blige, but neither should anyone confuse you with the Mary two photos down from yours in the high school yearbook.

Always related on a molecular level, but never duplicated on an existential level. Bone, sinew, flesh, and blood, things that make you laugh, memories that make you smile, events that make you sad, experiences that mold your attitudes, news that frightens you, encounters that bring you joy, personalities that make your blood boil, songs that make up your playlist, invitations that make your heart leap, wounds that harden your suspicions, arguments that change your mind, surprises that give you hope. You are you, and there is no one quite like you, and the world would be less without you.

Occasionally, we'll acknowledge to enthusiastic new members that, inevitably, there will be times when the church will disappoint you, will fail

to meet your expectations. It's just the nature of community, which is always an endeavor of flawed people just trying to find their way and mark their lives with some semblance of faith in God. Over time there grows a list of those who left with unmet expectations. Such is the life of every church, and yet, whether one's journey here is brief or endures, every name, every person is significant in the narrative of God's journey with God's people. Never forget that your presence here holds meaning. Never forget that our story here is integral to God's purpose, that our shared stories are the raw materials God's Spirit is using to sew a tapestry of reconciliation and redemption. Yes, it is observably a flawed tapestry, occasionally torn, certainly frayed at the ends, yet it holds together through an abundance of grace.

I know that the church of Christ, the narrative of God's redemption, and my own life have been blessed by an elder who was the matriarch of a major furniture enterprise and an elder who spent two years of his childhood in a state orphanage; by two elders, each the daughter of Presbyterian ministers, and a set of twins, eventual elders themselves, who as kids on the poor side of town would steal scrap metal from the back of a junkyard, take it around front and sell it to the owner all over again; by two

elders who were grandsons of a legendary senator and an elder whose father-in-law had been the biggest bootlegger in the county; by elders comfortable in the executive suite and elders more at home in a ditch wrangling sewage pipes; by members who have ascended impressive mountains and members who have struggled with addiction; by servant leaders slogging away in obscurity and others regularly quoted in the news; by members who grew up surrounded by love and members who grew up drowning in dysfunction. And the measure of Christ's Church would have been sorely diminished without the presence of a single one of them.

You matter. No life is insignificant. No name is forgotten in the narrative of God's redemption. You know, obituaries can be an interesting read. Over time, I have come to realize that the length of the obituary has little correlation to the quantity of honors and achievements of the deceased. It may not even be connected to how deeply the person was beloved. Often, the length of the obituary is related to the insecurity of a child worrying about whether the life of a parent will be remembered as having mattered; because if it didn't, that may cast doubt on the significance of the child's own life.

What Maya Angelou said of those who came before us, will be no less true of us somewhere down the road: “We are braver and wiser because they existed, those strong women and strong men... We are who we are because they were who they were. It’s wise to know where you come from, who called your name.” That’s what Matthew was telling us through that unusual genealogy of mostly unfamiliar, and sometimes scandalous, names. With our stories, no matter how crazy the chapters may seem, we are woven into the grand tapestry of God’s redemption. As playwright George Bernard Shaw observed, "If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance." Amen.