

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“God’s Imperfect Family: Tamar and Hope”
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Matthew 1:1-6
Genesis 38:12-19

John Wesley Hodge. It is not a name any of you would be familiar with, but he is my great, great grandfather. He was an itinerant Methodist minister in Louisiana in the early to mid-1800s. I suppose his occupation ought to make me want to claim him as an ancestor, but I wish he was not in my family tree. I wish he was not because he not only volunteered to fight for the Confederacy, but he raised his own company to fight for the rights of Louisianans to enslave and debase people of color. I am not sure if he was a slave owner but having met some of his descendants, it is clear he passed on to many of them a deep hatred for blacks with racism a mile wide. It may be that all of us, given enough searching could find someone we would not want in our family tree; someone who reminds us that we are part of imperfect families. If we believe religious writers across the centuries, Jesus has those same kind of people in his family tree; people who make his family seem as imperfect as mine. Now, interestingly enough, the people who make his family tree seem imperfect are three out of the four women who are mentioned in his lineage: Tamar, Rahab and Ruth. They are portrayed as making his family imperfect because each of them have scandalous personal stories. What we are going to be doing over the next four weeks before Christmas is dig a bit deeper into the stories of these women to see what we can find, and to discover if they really make Jesus’ family imperfect or if there is something else we ought to see.

We begin with Tamar and the traditional telling of the tale. This tradition makes it clear that as my grandmother would say, Tamar was a hussy. The retelling begins with Tamar being childless and desperate to have a child. She was so desperate that she would go to any lengths to conceive, including seducing her father-in-law. We know this because when Tamar heard that Judah, her father-in-law, who was just over mourning for his deceased wife, was headed for Timnah to shear sheep so she laid a trap for him. She dressed like a prostitute, lay in wait for him and used her feminine wiles to seduce him. Her scheme worked, and she became pregnant. As my grandmother would say, what a hussy. She was, in other words, a sinful woman who crossed the bounds of decency and ought not to be mentioned in Jesus’ lineage at all. All of this poses a problem for this traditional reading. It poses a problem because King David named one of his daughters after her. It poses a problem because later in this story Judah will proclaim that she is more righteous than he is. And finally, it poses a problem, because the writer of Matthew, undoubtedly a good Jew, makes sure to mention her in Jesus’ genealogy. So, what gives?

What gives, is that Tamar was a woman who hoped in the justice of God and worked to make that justice a reality. Let me say that again. Tamar was a woman who hoped in the justice of God and worked to make that justice a reality. Now the backstory that is often left out. Tamar was married to Judah's eldest son. The son died before they could have a child. The law, and the justice of God in this case, was that the next son would marry her and have a child in order that the older brother's memory would remain alive. Son number two married her but refused to do his husbandly duty with her. He too died. This left the third son who was to marry her, but at the time of son number two's death he was too young to marry. Judah told Tamar to go live with her parents until son number three was old enough to marry, implying that he would send for her and she could have a son to keep her husband's, and remember, Judah's son's memory alive. Well, when the youngest son was old enough, he "forgot" to send Tamar an email or text letting her know it was time to come home. When she discovered this, she put her plan into action. And this is where hope comes in. Tamar could not force Judah to proposition her and sleep with her. This is something only God could do...so she hoped. Tamar could not force herself to become pregnant. This is something only God could do...so she hoped. Tamar believed that God was a God of justice, and so lived into the hope that God would act. The conclusion of the story is that God did act, she became pregnant and justice for her and her deceased husband was served. This is the reason Judah calls her righteous and David names his daughter after her.

This past Thursday I was having breakfast with David Paterson and he commented that the saying we often use, "It is what it is" he said defeats hope. It makes hope irrelevant. I have been pondering this for the last couple of days and realized that what we should say, is not, "it is what it is", but instead "what ought to be, will be." In other words, what God desires for this world is what we ought to be working for and doing so with hope that God will bless our actions. This is what Tamar showed us. She showed us that what is, is not necessarily what ought to be, but that what ought to be, will be if we are willing to hope and act on that hope. This is also the message of her descendant whose birth we will celebrate in a few weeks. God did not look at the world and say, "It is what is" or "they are who they are", but what ought to be, will be. And so, God sent God's only son to teach, preach, heal and die for the world so that justice might live. Jesus is born into this world not to say, it is what it is, but to say what ought to be, ought to be.

The challenge before us then is to be Tamars. It is to be those who say what ought to be, will be and then act in hope of that reality. My challenge to you then this week, is this, to ask yourselves how am I being a Tamar in this world, hoping in God and working for justice?