

“Family History”
Matthew 1:1-17
First Sunday of Advent

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December 1, 2019
Westminster, Greenville

Some of you have noticed that I have maintained a certain NEUTRALITY in the Clemson-Carolina rivalry around here, and because of that, some of you have asked what college sports team I pull for...the answer is Iowa.

Even though I grew up in Michigan St. territory, I root for Iowa. Football, basketball—I’m a Hawkeye fan. Why?

It all comes straight from my dad.
My father grew up in a small town in Iowa.
And even though he didn’t attend the University of Iowa, that was his team.

His loyalty to the Iowa Hawkeyes runs deep.

In fact, my father is a semi-retired college professor at Michigan St., as some of you know. And back when he was teaching full time, and Iowa would be about to play MSU in football, my dad was fond of wearing his Iowa sweatshirt into the classroom the Friday before that Saturday’s game.

And he would teach classes in his Iowa sweatshirt.
And it drove some of his colleagues up the wall.

On one occasion, one of his friends, a fellow teacher, said to him, “Ron, how can you do it? Michigan St. signs your paycheck, Michigan St. is the reason you have a roof over your head. Michigan St. is the reason you can feed your children...how can you wear an Iowa sweatshirt around here?”

To which my father replied, “I was born in Iowa, I was raised in Iowa, I went to a small college in Iowa, and I want to be buried in Iowa.”

To which his friend replied, “You keep wearing that sweatshirt, that last wish will come sooner than you think.”

Now why do I share that with you?

Not because I assume everyone here cares about sports affiliations.
No, my point is family history.

Family history is important, right?

It doesn't determine EVERYTHING about us, but it says a lot about us.
I think the Gospel writer Matthew knew this.
I think that's why he opens his Gospel by giving us Jesus' family history.

I wonder if, as you heard all those names read a moment, if you just tuned out a bit, figured you'd wait until the sermon began to start paying attention...

That's ok if you did.

But let's take a closer look at those names.
A traditional genealogy in Matthew's day would have only listed the men.
Yet on five different occasions, Matthew makes an exception to this rule.

Did you notice that?
Matthew includes five women in his genealogy:

There's Tamar, Rahab,
Ruth, "the wife of Uriah" (that's Bathsheba), and Mary.

Why does Matthew include women?
And why does Matthew include THESE women?

If you go back to their stories, a pattern starts to become clear.

Let's start with Tamar.

The whole story is in Genesis 38, but the short version is this: Tamar is the daughter-in-law of Judah. She is mistreated by Judah, cast aside by Judah—and then she pretends to be a prostitute in order to trick Judah, and keep her place in Judah's family.

There's Rahab. She was a foreigner—a Canaanite, an enemy of Israel.
But she helped the Israelites just before they fought the battle of Jericho.

Then we come to Ruth.

It's THEOLOGICAL.

Matthew is trying to tell us what it means to say that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

And the first thing it means is that God is with us when we are at our most vulnerable.

When something happens in our lives that's not what we had planned. Like with Tamar and Bathsheba on this list.

And the FRAGILE nature of life becomes very clear, very quickly...

I recall in the first church that I served, there was a wonderful woman named Barb. Barb was a "roving reporter" for the church newsletter, and she also was a mom, about 50 years old, battling cancer.

I'll never forget the piece she wrote for the church's newsletter, the one that she titled, "What I Learned From Cancer":

Part of it went like this:

"I have seen my vulnerability...

"Now that my innocence is gone...I have been released to contemplate the most important mystery in life. And that is my relationship with the Lord."

"I don't have to be the fastest one on the road. I don't have to be the best or the brightest...Life is not a contest or a race.

"When I understand that each day is important, I do not squander today looking forward to tomorrow. During a discussion about getting older and moving to the next grade in school, my third grader heaved a huge sigh...and said to me, 'You know, Mom, I wish time didn't fly so fast. I really like being a third grader.'

"Enjoy what and where you are," Barb wrote, "and live deliberately."

"I will wake each morning thanking God for each of my blessings."

That was 20 years ago.

I think Barb would have said that God’s grace and love were at work when she was at her most vulnerable...

So first point: God is with us when we are most vulnerable.
But Matthew makes another point here to...there are times when vulnerability is a choice we can make.

A choice NOT to be defensive, and to put our guard down.
A choice not to keep doing what we’ve always done, but to step out of our comfort zones.

This, I think, what Rahab and Ruth have to teach us on this list.
Both of those women made choices—they took risks.
They stepped forward with enormous courage, and became more vulnerable than they needed to be...

And God used those choices in ways that they could never foresee.

In the novel *Plainsong*, the story is told of life in a small, Colorado town.

Victoria is a 17-year-old whose mother has thrown her out of the house because she is pregnant. Maggie Jones, a schoolteacher, has taken her in, but Maggie also cares for her aging father, who struggles with dementia.

And he becomes dangerous to Victoria.

So one day, Maggie drives 17 miles south
to the ranch of two elderly brothers,
Raymond and Harold McPheron.

“I came out here to ask you a favor,” she said to them.
“There is a girl I know who needs some help.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Harold said. “She need a donation of money?”

“No, she needs a lot more than that,” Maggie replies.

And Maggie explains that the girl’s father abandoned the family some time ago, her mother won’t have her in the house because she’s pregnant, and the father of her child doesn’t want anything to do with her.

“All right then,” Harold said. “You...don’t want money. What do you want?”

“I want something improbable,” Maggie says to those two brothers.
“I want you to think about taking this girl in. Of letting her live with you.”

“You’re fooling,” Harold said.

“Oh, I know it sounds crazy,” Maggie replies.

“I suppose it is crazy. But that girl needs somebody...and I’m ready to take desperate measures. She needs a home...

“And you,” she smiled at them,
“—you old [boys] need somebody too.

“Somebody or someone besides an old red cow to care about and worry over. It’s too lonesome out here...look at you. You’re going to die someday without ever having had enough trouble in your life.

Not the right kind anyway. This is your chance.”

So the McPheron brothers give Victoria a place to stay.

And it’s not without its challenges.

On one occasion they learn that the town’s been spreading rumors about them, hosting a teenage girl in their house. But they have ALWAYS treated Victoria with respect and honor and care.

On another occasion she leaves town to live with a boy...and when the two brothers find out and go home and she’s no longer with them, they try to fall sleep, “but lay awake across the hall from each other, thinking about her, and felt how the

house was changed now, how it seemed all of a sudden so lonesome and empty” without her.

Eventually Victoria comes back.
And they take her in a second time.

And at the end of the novel, the baby—a daughter—is born.

And Raymond, who has helped birth plenty of calves, but has never held a baby before...he takes this child, and he holds Victoria’s newborn daughter “fearfully out in front of his old face...”

“My goodness,” he says, looking at her... “My lord almighty.”²

C.S. Lewis once wrote:

“To love at all is to be vulnerable.

Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung
and possibly be broken.

If you want to make sure of keeping it intact,
you must give your heart to no one...

Wrap it round with hobbies and little luxuries;
avoid all entanglements, lock it safe in the casket or coffin
[of] your own selfishness.

“But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change.
[Your heart] will not be broken: it will become unbreakable,
impenetrable, irredeemable.”³

Friends, the story of Christmas is, at its heart,
the story of God becoming VULNERABLE.

² Kent Haruf, *Plainsong*, New York: Vintage Books, 1999.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1960.

Of the Lord Almighty throwing caution to the wind,
and inviting trouble into God's life by entering our world,
as a helpless, crying child.

Born to a poor, young mother named Mary, this child grows up in a
backwater town.

With Mary as his mother, Joseph as his father.
And together, those two parents shape this child.

If you want to know why Jesus turned out the way he did, look at his family
history. Look at his parents.

They're not a wealthy family, but they're a faithful family.

A family that lives under the thumb of Roman occupation.
Which means that Jesus learns something from his family about who is the
most vulnerable in his society.

Mary and Joseph, I believe, shape the way that Jesus thinks about other
people.

And when he's an adult, he shows his love for God by spending time with
the rejected and the despised and the marginal...in other words, the most
vulnerable people.

And the people in power say don't do it.

The people in power say to him, "You're not supposed to eat with those
people, you're not supposed to forgive those people, you're not supposed to be
spending time with those people."

But Jesus just kept on doing it.

And finally, the people in power said ENOUGH!
And they arrest Jesus and they crucify Jesus....and here's the thing:

He let them do it.

I might have to take a chance
with my love and with my faith this Advent...

Amen.