

“Strolling Through the Cemetery”

Matthew 1:1-17

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

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Have you ever been overwhelmed by a list of names before?

I don't mean what I just read to you.

We'll get to that in a moment.

I'm thinking of seeing names that you don't know, in a place that's sacred, and wondering...who those people were.

For example, I have a vivid memory of my first visit to Arlington National Cemetery. This was decades ago, in the late 1990s. I was by myself that day, and it was a memorable visit...not only because of all the names of people who gave their lives for this country.

It was also memorable because of what happened on my way out.

You see, as I was leaving, I was walking by a gravestone marker, not watching what I was doing, and somehow...I managed to trip over it.

I was embarrassed. I looked around.

No one saw me do it.

So I looked down to see whose headstone it was. Much to my surprise, I had stumbled over the grave of Thurgood Marshall.

The irony took my breath away.

Here was a man who dedicated his life to helping our country move in a more faithful direction during the Civil Rights movement, successfully arguing *Brown v Board of Education*. And who subsequently became the first Black justice on the Supreme Court.

Someone who dedicated his career to helping our country pay closer attention to where we were going and where we needed to go. And there I was, paying no attention to where I was going, and tripping over his grave.

You've got to be careful, when you're strolling, absent-mindedly, through a cemetery.

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Were any of you strolling absent-mindedly as I was reading that long list of names a couple minutes ago?

I know...it's hard to pay attention to genealogies in the Bible.

“...Hezron the father of Aram...the father of Aminadab...the father of Nahshon...”

Who were these people?

Why would Matthew begin his Gospel with a list of 42 generations of people?

If anyone here has been attending Leigh's Sunday School class recently, you'll know that this was no ordinary genealogy.

A traditional genealogy in Matthew's day would have only listed the men. But on five different occasions, Matthew makes an exception to this rule...besides Mary, the mother of Jesus, Matthew includes four other WOMEN.

Do you remember who they are?

The first is Tamar. The whole story is in Genesis 38, but the short version is this: Tamar is the daughter-in-law of Judah. She's mistreated by Judah, cast aside by Judah...he's trying to get her out of the family, and she's forced to do something desperate and clever to stay protected and within the family.

Then we have Rahab. Rahab was a Canaanite, the enemy of Israel, and she risks her family's life to save some spies for Israel.

Then there's Ruth, a Moabite widow, who risks her own life to stay with her Hebrew mother-in-law.

The fourth is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. And King David doesn't care...David takes Bathsheba, does what he ought not to do with Bathsheba, and then has Uriah killed in battle to try to cover up his scandal and his sin.

So the question is not only why did Matthew include women...but why THESE women? Why not Sarah? Why not Rebecca? Why not Rachel?

I think there are different reasons why Matthew chose these four women, in addition to Mary, to include in his genealogy of Jesus...this morning, I want to focus on the middle two.

On Rahab and Ruth.

What do these two women have in common?

They're foreign women.

Not Israelite women.

This was a very important message for Matthew's church to hear.

You see, most biblical scholars believe Matthew's congregation was composed of Jewish Christians who were experiencing an influx of strangers...not Jewish people, but Gentile people.

What do we do with the Gentiles in our midst?  
That was the question facing Matthew's church.

And by starting his Gospel the way he does, Matthew reminds his church that Jesus didn't just come from people "inside the fold," but from people "outside the fold."

Matthew is telling his church that there is no Jesus and there is no Gospel without welcoming the stranger and reaching out to the stranger and loving the stranger...

A little Bible pop quiz for you:  
In Matthew's Gospel, how many shepherds arrive to visit Jesus after he's born?

Zero.  
Matthew doesn't have shepherds.  
He has wise men from the East...in other words, in Matthew's Gospel, the baby Jesus is visited not by his own people, but by foreign people.

And at the end of his Gospel, what does the risen Jesus say to his disciples?

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."  
All nations is an ok translations.  
The Greek actually reads: "Gentiles..."

This is the beauty of Matthew's genealogy. By including these particular women, especially Rahab and Ruth, Matthew is reminding his church that we can never use a BROAD BRUSH to write off or cast out or exclude people just because they are strangers to us.

What a timely message for our own day, don't you think?

After all, with xenophobia on the rise, and Christian Nationalism on the rise, God's church cannot stay silent. It must love the foreigner, the outsider, the stranger. And treat all children of God with the dignity God gave them.

Of course, it's one thing to say that the Gospel commands us to love the stranger, no matter who they are. It's another thing to live it, right?

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A few summers ago, eight friends gathered around a backyard dinner table in Washington D.C., to celebrate family and friendship. The table was set with incredible food and French wine...it was one of those nights that lingered on in a great way.

It was getting late when Michael, one of the hosts that night, looks up and sees, as if in slow motion, a hand, holding a gun, which comes between him and his wife.

The gun belongs to a man, medium in height, no one knows him. He's wearing designer sweats, and he says, "Give me your money."

He keeps repeating the phrase over and over again, harsh and angry: "Give me your money."

Fear and terror invade that backyard.

But there's another problem.

Like many people today, no one is carrying any cash on them.

No one has any money to offer at that moment.

The man is insistent: "Give. Me. Your. Money."

But then Christina pipes up. “You know, we’re celebrating,” she says. “Why don’t you have a glass of wine?”

All of a sudden, the look on the man’s face changes.  
He takes a sip of wine.  
And says, “Huh, that’s a really good glass of wine.”

He then reaches for the cheese and, as he does so, he places the gun in his pocket.

He drinks his glass of wine. He eats more cheese.  
Everyone just watches, frozen.

Then the intruder says something that no one expected.  
He announces: “I think I’ve come to the wrong place.”

Quickly, everyone responds: “Oh, hey, yeah, I understand, that could happen to anybody...of course.”

But he’s still there, and he still has the gun...and THEN the intruder says something that again, nobody expects.

He says, “Can I get a hug?”  
So Michael’s wife hugs him.  
The intruder looks around, “Can we have a group hug?”

And everyone forms an awkward circle around the man.

When the hug finishes, he says, “I’m sorry,” and walks out of the front gate with a glass of wine in his hand. After this night ended and people were leaving, Michael found that wine glass—not thrown, not carelessly discarded, but carefully placed on the sidewalk.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From NPR’s Invisibilia Podcast, “Flip the Script,” July 15, 2016, co-hosted by Lulu Miller, Hanna Rosin and Alix Spiegel at <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510307/invisibilia>. I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for calling my attention to this story.

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How did they do it?  
I don't know how they did it.

And I'm tempted to think, yeah, that's a nice story, but it's not how the world really works...and yet, and yet...what's true is that some of God's children have given their lives for the belief that loving the stranger is the **ONLY WAY** the world will ever work.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote:

“Men often hate each other because they fear each other, and they fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they can't communicate with each other, and they can't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other.

**“And I think one of the great tragedies of life is that more often men seek to live in monologue rather than dialogue....”<sup>2</sup>**

Let me engage in a little dialogue with you right now...

How many of you were listening during the announcements this morning?

How many of you heard the need for more toys for the Magi Market this morning in the announcements? That would be a wonderful way for you to reach out in love toward strangers who happen to be our church's neighbors.

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<sup>2</sup> From “Towards Freedom,” transcript of a speech given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Dartmouth College, May 23, 1962, at [www.dartmouth.edu](http://www.dartmouth.edu). This speech can easily be found through a Google search. The bolded line is my emphasis.

Or how many of you heard the announcement that Suppers with Seven sign-ups are taking place? It's a terrific way to get to know people in our very own church family who just might be a stranger to you.

How many of you remember the challenge from a year or so ago...to find five people that you don't know in this sanctuary on Sunday mornings, and over the course of the year...get to know them.

Be intentional.

Turn a stranger into a friend.

You see, I think Matthew opened his Gospel with his genealogy written the way he did—to make his own church STUMBLE a bit...oh yeah, this is where Jesus came from—wait a minute.

This is where Jesus came from?

To get them to try to grow in their love.

To prompt them to step outside the comfort zones of their love.

Have you ever asked God to help you grow in your love?

To step out of your comfort zones and expand the way you love?

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A number of years ago, *Sports Illustrated* told the story of Perry Reese.

Reese was a remarkable basketball coach in Berlin, Ohio, which was, at least at that time, a small, all-white, mostly Amish and Mennonite community, a community which hadn't changed much in 200 years.

Reese did not look like his community.

He was the only Black person in town.

He was also single. And he was Roman Catholic.  
He was hired to be an assistant basketball coach.

But when the head coach resigned unexpectedly, Reese—by default—took his place as the head coach at Hiland High School.

After Reese took over, there was grumbling.  
There was skepticism.

There was blatant racism...one landlord “forgot” that he didn’t rent to single people; another group of gentleman in town took Reese out for a couple drinks, and then tried to get him picked for a DUI so that he’d be fired.

Now...if you were Perry Reese, what would you have done at that moment?

Would you stay with the job?  
Why not find a more enlightened place to coach?  
Why not find another town, another team?

Perry Reese stayed.

And Hiland began to win basketball games—an unprecedented number of basketball games, until finally, unbelievably, their community team of Mennonite and Amish boys captured a state championship.

Along the way, Coach Reese won the acceptance, and the affection, and the respect of the community—not only because the team won, although that played a role—but also because of his quiet grace, and his work ethic, and his personal strength, and his loyalty to the youngsters.

High school kids loved him!  
They hung out at his house.

When some of the basketball players made a big mistake—they broke into and stole merchandise from a hardware store—Reese took personal responsibility for them, making sure they spent a couple weeks in a juvenile detention center, and then reinstating them on the team.

When Perry Reese was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, the community of Berlin, Ohio discovered that it had changed because this one-time stranger was now a beloved friend.

At his funeral, the entire community gathered in St. Peter's Catholic Church.

Everyone was there for the funeral.  
Mennonites, Baptists...  
Then it was time for communion.

Including people who are not Catholic in communion?  
It's against the rules in the Catholic Church.  
What was the priest to do?

Well, this was Perry Reese's funeral...he knew what to do.  
Everyone came forward.  
Everyone was served.<sup>3</sup>

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Which begs the question: who will you and I serve this Christmas?

We'll spend time, I'm sure, with family, with friends.  
What about the stranger?

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Smith, "Higher Education," Sports Illustrated, March 5, 2001. The article can found at [How HS basketball coach Perry Reese Jr. changed a community - Sports Illustrated Vault | SI.com](#)

According to Matthew, there is no Christmas story without welcoming the stranger, loving the stranger.

How many of you have a Christmas list?  
I think God has one too.  
God's Christmas list.

The list of people whom God has asked to step outside their zones of comfort to love the stranger in their midst.

Who's on that list of names?

Ruth and Rahab...are on the list.  
Joseph and Mary...are on the list.  
All the members of Matthew's church...  
Martin Luther King, Jr...definitely on the list.

It's quite a list.  
God's Christmas list...

What do you think?  
Do you think your name belongs on that list?

Amen.