

“The Holy Family Tree”
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Mt. 1:1-6,16,17)

I was going through some old photographs of my family recently, and I came across this picture of my great-grandparents on my mother’s side of the family. They are Lovic and Valinda Jane Livingston, my great grandparents. They are the parents of my mother’s mother. I checked with my cousin who has done research into our family tree, and I also called my 95-year-old aunt, who is the last living sibling to my mother, to find out about them.

In talking to these two relatives I learned that my great-grandparents had a farm in northern Mississippi. However, Lovic died when he was just 33. It seems a typhoid epidemic swept through northern Mississippi in the late 1800s, and Lovic and one of their daughters died in it. Valinda Jane and her daughter Maggie, who is my grandmother, along with my grandmother’s brother Henry, had to move in with relatives and rent out their farmland while they essentially worked as hired hands for the relatives. It’s no wonder that my grandmother was eager to move to central Mississippi and leave the farm when she met my grandfather. That’s all I really know about Lovic and Valinda Jane. For a number of reasons, we’re not able to go very far back in tracing our roots on either side of my family tree.

I’ve met some people in this church who have quite a legacy here in North Carolina, and multiple generations of the family have lived in the Tar Heel State. How many of you are 3rd generation North Carolinians? How many are 4th generation? Any 5th generation North Carolinians here? People whose families have been in one place for a very long time take great pride in their heritage, and rightly so.

Studying one’s genealogy can be a fascinating experience. We find out where we come from, who our people were, and we trace our roots. But there are times when what we discover in our family background isn’t quite what we thought we’d find. Did you hear about the woman from a blue-blood family in Boston who paid \$5,000 for someone to trace her family tree, and then \$10,000 to cover it up?!

The Gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, and here we see an outline of His family tree. When I was growing up, I remember reading this passage, struggling to pronounce the names, and thinking to myself, “Why in the world is this passage even in the Bible?! It’s pretty boring to wade through all these names.” However, over the years I’ve come to see that there are great

biblical truths contained in the lists of names in Scripture, and we would do well to slow down and consider the reasons why God has them in the Bible.

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It may seem strange to us that Matthew would choose to begin his gospel with a genealogy, but to a devout Jew at the time of Christ it was the most natural, most interesting, and you could even argue the most essential way to begin the story of a person's life. Jews were very concerned with where a person came from and who their daddy was. And for Jesus to be able to trace his lineage all the way back to Abraham, the father of the nation, would be pretty impressive. It would be like tracing your family tree back to George Washington, or to someone who sailed on the Mayflower.

If you study the genealogy of Jesus, you'll see that there is actually a structure to the list of names. There are 3 sections which each list 14 names, and the 3 sections represent the 3 great periods of Israel's history. The first 14 generations lead upward from Abraham to King David. The second 14 generations plummet downward from the reign of Solomon to the Babylonian Exile. Finally, the last 14 generations move upward again from the Exile to the birth of Jesus. Think of these three sections like a capital N – up, down, and then up again. Each of these periods tells us something about God, and when all three are woven together we see a picture of the creative way in which God shaped human history for the Advent of His Son.

If you look very closely at the names in the first 14 generations, you'll see they include people we might not expect to find. Four of the ancestors are women. And all four of the women are not the sort of people one would be eager to include in one's family tree. The four women are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. It's rather shocking they're even included in the genealogy of Jesus.

Tamar was the woman who pretended to be a prostitute to trick her father-in-law, Judah, into keeping his promise to her (Gen. 38). Rahab really was a prostitute, but she is best known for helping the spies of Israel in Joshua 2 when they came to spy the city of Jericho. Ruth was from Moab, and she was the woman who persuaded Naomi to take her back with her to Israel after both women were widowed. And the fourth woman Matthew mentions he simply calls the wife of Uriah. It's almost like he's embarrassed to write her name. We know her elsewhere in Scripture as Bathsheba, the woman David saw bathing on a rooftop and with whom he had an affair. She was at the center of one of the most scandalous incidents of seduction, adultery, and murder in ancient history.

The simple fact that these women are even mentioned at all in the genealogy of Jesus is surprising, because Judaism emphasized descendancy through men. But more importantly, their inclusion also speaks of the mercy of God and His amazing

grace which is available to every person of every race, every tribe, every nation, and every background. None of these women could claim a good Jewish pedigree. Tamar was a Canaanite, Rahab was from Samaria, Ruth was from Moab, and Bathsheba was married to a Hittite. Most genealogies in the Old Testament were intended to show that a family line had been kept pure from racial contamination, but it's as though Matthew went out of his way to demonstrate that non-Jewish people were actually a part of Jesus' family tree. It speaks of the universality of God's message of grace.

Another thing that is striking about these four women is that three of them had been at one time in their lives sexually immoral. Few parents would have used the stories of Tamar, Rahab, or Bathsheba as positive role models for their children to follow. Mothers would never say, "And when you grow up, I hope you'll be just like her!" These scandals in the genealogy of Jesus tell us something about the mercy and grace of God, and that's Matthew's main reason for writing His gospel in the first place.

Later on, the Evangelist would say that Jesus came "*not for the righteous, but for sinners*" (9:13), and "*It is not the healthy that need a doctor but the sick*" (9:12). In the genealogy of Jesus Matthew shows us that Christ came not only *for* sinners but *through* sinners! As the great reformer Martin Luther once said, "Christ is the kind of person who isn't ashamed of sinners – in fact, He even puts them in His family tree!"¹

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There are two things I think about when I reflect on the inclusion of these women in the genealogy of Jesus. The **first** has to do with **how I look at myself**. These four women remind me that no matter what I have done, how often I have experienced rejection, or how much I feel like I don't belong in this world, there's always for me a place in the family of God.

Have you ever been in a social situation when you were on the outside looking in? We all have. There have been times when someone looked down on us or we were excluded simply because of the way we were dressed, or we didn't go to the right school, or we didn't belong to the right sorority, we weren't the right color, or we didn't have the right circle of friends. We were ostracized and made to feel like we were outsiders, we weren't acceptable, and we didn't belong.

These feelings of rejection can stay with you for a long time, can't they? You get defensive and play all sorts of imaginary conversations in your head defending yourself and making a case for why you should have been treated differently. Some people spend a lifetime trying to overcome that kind of rejection, trying to earn the respect of people who told them they didn't belong. You and I can waste

a lot of time on the outside looking in, wishing we could find acceptance. I know I've done my fair share of that.

The genealogy of Jesus reminds us that when you come right down to it none of us really belongs. None of us is good enough, none of us is righteous enough to be accepted by God. But He loves us anyway, and He's made a place for each one of us in His family of faith. None of us is qualified to be in God's family tree, but He lets sinners like these four women, and sinners like you and me, in anyway. It isn't a matter of having the right pedigree or even living a good life. None of that gets you in. Instead it's a matter of admitting that we all fall short, and we all need God's grace. None of us belongs, but God loves us anyway, and He invites us to come as we are to join the family and come to His party of grace.

The **second** thing this genealogy reminds me has to do with **how I look at other people who are different from me**. Sadly, those of us who call ourselves Christians have developed quite a reputation over the years for looking down on people who don't have it all together or who have made bad choices in life. We're viewed as a judgmental and holier-than-thou, and too many times the church has made people feel like they don't belong.

In his book about grace, Philip Yancey tells the story about a friend of his who worked in Chicago with the down-and-out of that city. A prostitute came to him one day in dire straits, and she shared with him her problems. He asked her if she ever thought of going to a church to ask for help, and the look on her face was one of shock. "Church!" she replied. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."²

But Jesus gained a reputation for being a friend of sinners, and He was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because He hung out with people like that so often. Somehow Jesus had a way of loving people no matter what they did while not approving of their choices in life. I wish I could learn how to do that more. I wish sinners were drawn more to the Jesus in me. I wish I didn't come across as critical and judgmental.

Think for a moment of the people you have the hardest time loving. In your mind's eye picture that one person you don't think belongs in the kingdom of God, or the person who you have a difficult time loving. Can you imagine them being loved and accepted by God? Can you picture them in the arms of Jesus, forgiven and included in His family of grace? If we can't do that, then you and I have some work to do, because Jesus always went after the rejected, and He rejoiced whenever a prodigal came home.

No one is too far from the reach of God's love, and there must be room in my heart, and room in this church, even for people who are hard to love. It doesn't mean we approve of everything they do, but it does mean we extend the hand of welcome and the arms of Jesus' love. Prejudice has no place in the heart of the

follower of Christ, and His genealogy reminds us there are no outsiders in the kingdom of God. Whosoever will call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. That's what the Bible says.

Conclusion.

Advent is a time of waiting. It's also a time to yield to God and leaning on the power of His Spirit work on becoming more faithful disciples of Christ. As we come to the Lord's Table, let me encourage you to talk to God about that person who is hard for you to love. Maybe it's a family member. Maybe it's someone at school. Maybe it's a co-worker, a teammate, a neighbor, or even someone who betrayed you. Maybe it's a white supremacist, or a terrorist, or a Republican or a Democrat.

John Calvin once said the meal of communion is "medicine for the soul." As we celebrate this sacrament, ask God to do a healing work in you and to change you to make room in your heart and room at this Table for even that person. Because, face it, none of us really belongs. It's all a matter of grace.

Here at the beginning of Matthew's gospel we're given a picture of just how remarkable God's love is for each one of us. He delights in calling the most unlikely people to Himself, and He wants all of us to know that we're invited to become a part of His family. God wants every single person here today to be with Him this Christmas. That's where you and I belong.

If Jesus wasn't afraid to have these four women in His family tree, then He isn't ashamed to have you and me or anyone else, in His family of faith either. There is room for each of us in the house of God – this Christmas and always. Amen.

¹Martin Luther, "Sermon on the Day of Mary's Birth," given September 8, 1522.

² Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, p. 11.