

Sermon for Sunday, November 3, 2019

Family Tree of Faith

Last Christmas my mom gave each member of our family a binder containing charts of our family tree. Come to find out she had spent months combing family albums and ancestry.com challenging herself to find out as much as she could about our family tree.

She uncovered facts I had never heard: I had always thought that my dad's side of the family was Methodist and that my mom's side was evangelical/non-denominational. But in the 1600's, my 6th generation Grandfather on my mother's side, came from Scotland and was a staunch Presbyterian...Apparently it's in my blood.

And as it turns out I have family from Scotland, England and Germany, from North Caroline, Tennessee, Nebraska, and Minnesota—I even discovered that, long before I ever imagined living in the state of MO, I had family who lived in Cook Station MO—In fact I now know that I have some Great, Great grandparents who are buried just outside of Cuba MO.

Within my family tree there are a whole host of occupations--telegraphers and signal maintainers who worked on the railroad, cooks and seamstresses, jewelers, soldiers and teachers —and while my mom discovered a lot of details and was able to follow some branches of our family tree as far back as the 1500's...just like every family tree—there are also holes—last names that just seem to magically disappear--and stories that some members of the family aren't so wild about putting down on paper.

I don't think my family is alone in this, because the truth is, it's not so fun to talk about the painful places of separation, estrangement, addiction or brokenness. It's so much more fun to discuss the famous, intelligent and important members of our family tree—the distant relation who was once royalty, our great, great grandparent who fought in the revolution or how we just might be the third cousin, twice removed on our mother's side to Taylor Swift...

And yet, anytime we take a dive into genealogy—we're bound to find a little bit of both the things we're proud of and the things we'd rather not have to own up to.

Today's New testament reading of Jesus genealogy, is no exception.

Now, I will be the first to admit that when I come across a long list of names in the bible—I have a tendency to gloss over them. When I was in college I decided to take a New Testament overview course during our Jan term. Jan term was one full semester, three credits, of one class, crammed into three weeks. Had I really known what I had signed on for, I wouldn't have done it...Each night we had to read a significant portion of the New Testament, take notes and be prepared for a

quiz in the morning. I quickly discovered that I couldn't read every single passage—so I had to figure out what to skip over.

When I opened up the book of Matthew to start reading I definitely noticed that it was a list of names and immediately skipped to verse 18. Who in their right mind would read a list of names? It couldn't possibly have something meaningful to say or to teach me...SKIP!

Guess what was on the quiz the next morning... “In Matthew's gospel—which ancestor does Jesus genealogy begin with...” It was as though my professor knew he was working with stressed out college students who would much rather do anything other than their homework... It was in that class that I learned an important lesson—a. do my homework, and b. God doesn't work in ordinary ways—God uses what we skip over—things like dusty genealogies and family trees, to point us to the radical, expectation breaking and empire toppling, redemptive work found in Jesus Christ.

So—just for a few moments—let's dive in to Jesus genealogy with this question—who exactly is in Jesus genealogy?

Matthew's gospel starts with Abraham—and works it's way up through 42 generations to Joseph.

Within all these names are some notable and obscure people.

- Abraham—who received God's promise that he, along with his wife Sarah, would have more descendants than there are stars in the sky...A great promise and one Abraham and Sarah *tried* to believe...but who also took matters into their own hands when God was moving just a little too slow for their taste...
- Jacob, who bought his brother Esau's birthright with stew-who stole his brother's blessing by deceiving their blind father and tricked him into believing that he, Jacob was Esau...and who also spent a whole night wrestling a stranger only to discover in the morning that he had in fact been wrestling God...
- King David, who was described as being a man after God's own heart, but who also sent Uriah—the husband of Bathsheba—to the front lines of battle so that Uriah would be killed and he, David, could have Bathsheba.
- There are over 11 kings listed in this lineage—some who did great things for Israel; expanding the kingdom, building the temple and calling the people to abandon other gods and follow the one true God of Israel...
 - And then there were other kings...who served their own interest, steered the people in the wrong direction, who saw the temple destroyed and the people of God carried off into exile...
- And in a world where genealogies were always focused on the patriarchal lineage—in an unexpected twist four women are included: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Mary.
 - Tamar who...well...it's a bit of a complicated, and in the interest of Sunday morning, I invite you to go read her story for yourself...trust me—it's a good story...
 - Rahab who was a prostitute and helped give cover to the Israelite spies when they came to scope out the promised land.

- Ruth who was a Moabite and considered an outsider to the Jewish faith—and yet here she is listed in Jesus, the Messiah's, family tree...
- And Mary, an unwed, pregnant teenager, who bore Jesus, God in human flesh, into the world...

Jesus genealogy reads like a who's who—names of the forebears of faith, famous kings and infamous leaders...but it also carries the stories of people longing and looking for home, of relationships broken and deep wounds endured, of promises made and not yet realized.

The author of Matthew winds his way from Abraham all the way up to Joseph and Mary—within these names are stories which weave through wilderness wanderings, Babylonian captivity and Roman occupation. It includes failure, success, heartache and joy, murder and new life, betrayal and scandal—and yet in all this messiness, we catch a glimpse of how God actively works through deeply flawed but faithful people to bring about the promised Messiah. Somehow this ragtag band of misfits and saints, are part of God's plan to redeem all of creation.

Growing up in a protestant tradition—I remember staring at the statue of Mary in my friend Helen's house—I didn't understand why Helen's mom lit candles and would sometimes make the sign of the cross when she passed by the statue—to my young eyes it looked odd. I didn't understand the idea of saints...

It wasn't until college when I became best friends with someone who was Roman Catholic—Layla helped me understand that saints were people who were set apart—people who had lived lives in close relationship with God and others and whom God had worked through to do incredible things—it wasn't the people who were extraordinary—it was the work God chose to do through them that made them saints.

But more recently I've started to think about the sainthood of all believers; that through our baptisms—you and I, in all of our imperfectness, are somehow, already saints. Because sainthood doesn't require perfection, but a willingness to do our best to point others to the reality of God's presence and love, even when it's a little messy and broken.

We have examples of living saints right here in our midst; Members who dedicate their time to working with kids at LEAD tutoring; Members who have joined our Food Ministry Team and help organize and distribute food at Isaiah 58; Members who teach Sunday school and make casseroles for St. Patrick Center; little saints who show up as Acolytes and reveal God's love through sharing and showing compassion to each other in Sunday school; Members who show up as Greeters and Ushers, who prepare and serve communion, our lectors, and those who share their gift of music each week in our choir; Members who do their absolute best to reveal the love of Christ in and beyond the walls of this place—in their families, communities and in their spheres of influence.

From the dusty genealogy of Jesus ancestry—to the names written on paper and those kept in our hearts—to you and to me who still have days left on this earth—we come to this table, God's table, with all the saints throughout the ages—a great cloud of witnesses—their lives giving us examples of how God is actively moving, breathing and working out the redemption of the world, through normal, everyday, broken and deeply faithful people...

Friends, sainthood isn't earned from being perfect—in fact it isn't earned at all and perfection was never part of the equation—it doesn't matter where you come from, how much money you have or what clothes you wear—it doesn't matter how messy your past is or the mistakes you've made—you are already a saint simply because God has claimed you and grafted you into the family tree of faith—a family tree that is full of misfits and yet is the vehicle for God's redeeming work in the world...

May we find strength and encouragement from the stories of saints who have gone before us and be open to following God's Spirit here and now as it moves and breaths in and through us.
May it be so, Amen.

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