

## Son of Uppity Women

It is quite significant that Matthew chooses to name five women in his genealogy of Jesus. In all the other genealogies in the Bible, and there are plenty, it is only men who are named. We can certainly give Matthew some well-deserved proto-feminist “cred” but one suspects that there is a deeper point here. Why these five women? They all have at least a whiff of scandal about them. Is Matthew pointing out that even the Messiah had sinners in his family tree? If so, there are plenty of candidates to prove that lesson among the menfolk. The women, in the words of King Lear, are more sinned against than sinning. As we look at the stories of these five Uppity Women this morning, it’s my contention that what we have in each of their stories is an examination of love, which you might have been expecting on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. In some cases, it is love fulfilled. In some, it is failure of love. And, ultimately, we see how all of those stories of love find their fulfilment in the name at the end of the list: Jesus, who is called the Messiah, the Son of Uppity Women.

Let’s start with the oldest of these stories, the tale of Tamar, found in Genesis 38. Tamar came into the family of Israel from another people – she was a Canaanite girl given in marriage to the oldest son of Judah, himself the son of Jacob and older brother of Joseph. When her husband, Er, died, Judah commanded his next oldest son, Onan, to impregnate Tamar, as demanded by custom in order to provide an heir to his brother’s line. The technical term is “levirate marriage.” Onan, not surprisingly, was less than enthusiastic about being the progenitor of a child who would receive his older brother’s inheritance, larger than his. He practiced a primitive form of birth control to deny Tamar a child. When Onan also died, Jacob put Tamar off, saying that his youngest son was too young for marriage. Even when young Shelah came of age, Judah ignored Tamar’s plight, as the book of Genesis tells us, “for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers.”

What we have so far in this story, then, is two different failures of love. Onan fails in loving duty to his deceased brother and his widow. Instead of being willing to provide an heir-in-name to Er and a child for Tamar, he honors his own greed, knowing that if there is no heir for Er, he, Onan, will receive the larger inheritance. Likewise, Judah fails in his loving duty to his daughter-in-law. He should have provided her with his youngest son to raise up an heir to her late husband and a continued place in the family for her.

Rather than be abandoned, Tamar hatches a plot. Judah has recently been widowed and has been without a woman’s “comfort” for some time. He is on his way to another town to sell some wool. So, Tamar washes up, puts on perfume and her best clothes, and a veil to hide her face, and she goes to wait for Judah at a crossroads where prostitutes are known to hang out. He encounters her and, assuming that she’s a local working girl, proposes a quickie in the adjoining field. But Judah’s not yet sold his wool, so his wallet is empty. In pledge for later payment, he gives the woman his personal seal and his walking stick in return for her services. Later, she produces these to prove that he is the one who made her pregnant.

Now, we may find Tamar’s actions scandalous and the whole concept of levirate marriage odd and distasteful but let’s consider the customs of the day. In his book, [The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible](#), Jonathan Kirsch asks and then answers the question, “Why is Tamar so desperate? ... The answer,” he writes, “lies in the plight of women in biblical times... A woman was forced to rely on her children for support if her husband died because a

widow generally did not inherit property from her deceased husband in the ancient Near East; under biblical law, a man's estate passed directly to his children or his other blood relations... For Tamar, a Canaanite woman who has married into her husband's tribe, the crisis of childlessness is even more dire. An outsider must bear children in order to earn a place in her husband's family, and if she is widowed before she has produced a child, then she is likely to remain a stranger in the eyes of her husband's clan. For that reason, Tamar finds herself in terrible peril..." Tamar commits the act that so shocks our modern sensibilities because through it, she obtains justice for herself. Judah admits as much in Genesis 38:26: "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." In due time, Tamar gives birth to twins, Perez and Zerah, and Perez is among the ancestors of Jesus.

Perez is also the ancestor of a man named Salmon, who, the genealogy tells us, is the father of Boaz by Rahab. Now Rahab really is a scandalous woman, the prototypical hooker with a heart of gold. We find her story in Joshua 2, where she hides the spies who have come to look for flaws in the defense of Jericho. You may remember the story: in return for hiding the two spies and helping them escape, she makes them promise to spare her and her family when the Hebrew army destroys Jericho. "I know that the Lord has given you the land," she says, "and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you... The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family." Rahab keeps her promise and the spies keep theirs. Her love of her family, her honesty to the spies, and her recognition of Yahweh has saved her family's lives. Although it may seem an odd legacy for a Canaanite prostitute, she is remembered in rabbinic literature and even in the New Testament as an example of faith. The writer of Hebrews includes her in the "great cloud of witnesses." Hebrews 11:31 says, "By faith, Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace." In James 2:25, we read, "Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?" And so, Rahab joins the list of Jesus' ancestors.

Rahab's son, Boaz, is a major character in our next story as well. His wife, Ruth, is usually seen as the very model of faithful love as her care for her widowed and suddenly childless mother-in-law, Naomi, is remembered. But there is a bit of sexual scandal in Ruth's story, as well. To begin with, Ruth's in-laws have moved, at the beginning of the book that bears her name, from Bethlehem to Moab to seek relief from a famine. Moab is not only a neighboring country with a history of conflict with the Israelites, they are also distant cousins, descended from Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his incestuous coupling with his eldest daughter. Ew. So, the very inclusion of a Moabite in the salvation history of Israel is scandalous enough.

But there is also some scandal in the way the story plays out. I hope you remember the basics. After the family moves to Moab and the sons marry Moabite women, the father and his two sons die, suddenly. Naomi, thinking she may find mercy from a relative back in Bethlehem, sets out for home, releasing her daughters-in-law to return to their families. But Ruth, who had apparently bonded deeply with her mother-in-law, refused, giving us the beautiful words for which she is best known: "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried."

The two women return to Bethlehem where Ruth gleans in the fields belonging to her late husband's rich relative Boaz. The righteousness of Boaz, who remembered the Torah command to allow widows, orphans, and immigrants to glean his harvest behind his reapers, saves their lives. In this, he stands in contrast with his ancestor, Judah, who did not care for the vulnerable young woman in his care, Tamar. But Naomi and Ruth were not content to eke out a precarious existence and so the uppity Naomi conceived a plan and the uppity Ruth implemented it.

At the end of the barley harvest, Naomi told Ruth, "Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." A little context is necessary: in agrarian societies, the feasts following harvest and threshing were often blow-out affairs. People often over-indulged. For those who worshipped deities of fruitfulness and harvest, there were often activities that celebrated human fruitfulness. Into this rather charged atmosphere, comes a young, eligible woman, perfumed and wearing her nicest frock, who lies down next to the rich bachelor and uncovers his... feet. It may have been Sigmund Freud who said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," but many Hebrew scholars believe that in the Bible, feet are not always feet. When Boaz awoke in the middle of the night, he found himself in a rather compromising position with Ruth, who, far from waiting for instructions from Boaz, seized her opportunity. "He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." Boaz, being a righteous fellow and already taken with Ruth, complies and smuggles her out the next morning to preserve her reputation. He then sets the wheels in motion to marry Ruth properly and everyone in town gives their blessing: "...through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." The town, it seems, have not forgotten the scandal of Boaz' ancestry, even if they are polite in the way they bring it up.

Boaz' gentlemanly treatment of Ruth did not, alas, inspire his great-grandson, David, the king. As the genealogy remarks, "Boaz (was) the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah..." The wife of Uriah, of course, had a name but Matthew thinks it best not to write Bathsheba. We'll come back to that in a moment. But first, who was this scandalous woman? II Samuel 11:3 tells us that she was "daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." That doesn't mean much to us, but it would have to David. The woman that he sees from his rooftop and desires is the daughter of one of his most trusted warriors and the wife of another. Both Eliam and Uriah are in the list of "The Thirty," David's elite soldiers, found in II Samuel 23. In that list, we also learn that Eliam is the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite. Again, not a name that most of us remember but Ahithophel shows up in several of the Davidic stories as one of his most trusted counsellors. II Samuel 16 says, "the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the oracle of God; so, all the counsel of Ahithophel was esteemed..." When David decides to send for Bathsheba, he knows that she is family to three men to whom he owes a great deal.

Bathsheba has gotten bad press for centuries as a seductress, but I think in this era of "Me, Too!" we may be able to see things from her vantage point. She was not flaunting herself when David

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saw her bathing from his rooftop. She was probably performing the ritual cleansing after menstruation in a bath built for that purpose, undoubtedly screened from sight. David's palace, the tallest building in Jerusalem, had a unique vantage point but David was supposed to be in the field with his army. He shouldn't have been watching her. And, as we know from too many stories of late, an unaccompanied woman in private conversation with a powerful man is vulnerable. Remember what I said about "more sinned against than sinning?" I see no evidence in this story that Bathsheba was anything but an innocent victim of a bored man with unrestrained power.

In any event, the action has dreadful repercussions. In attempting to cover up his sin, David manipulates military orders to make sure that Uriah is slain in battle, then takes the grieving Bathsheba as his wife. David repents after being challenged by the prophet Nathan, but the child born to Bathsheba as a result of David's rape dies. The whole affair sets a bad tone in David's family. Some time later, his son Amnon rapes his beautiful half-sister, another unfortunate young woman with the name Tamar. David's favorite son, Absalom kills Amnon and later rebels against his father, a rebellion in which he is aided by Ahitophel, David's great counsellor and grandfather of Bathsheba.

But if David is exposed as a man who fails in love to his friends and his subjects, Bathsheba shows a fiercely protective love for her son, Solomon. The early chapters of the book of I Kings show how she manipulated David in his old age to name Solomon as his heir and then counselled her son on what measures to take to secure his throne. I suspect that all the sentimentality has been burned out of Bathsheba by her rape, and the deaths of her husband, child, and grandfather but she is absolutely loyal to her surviving son. Today, we might term her a "mama bear."

Finally, we come to a young woman whom none of us likely associate with sexual scandal, Mary. But that wasn't always the case and probably wasn't with Matthew's original audience. The story of Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit had competition during Jesus' lifetime and in the early years after his death with some less salubrious theories. One, of course, was that the betrothed couple, Joseph and Mary, had "jumped the gun" and had sexual relations prior to the wedding. Another was that Mary had either had an affair with or been raped by a Roman soldier named Pantera. You can still find whole websites devoted to that theory. It's clear that Jesus' own neighbors thought that Mary was no better than she should have been. In Mark's coverage of Jesus' sermon in Nazareth, he records the people as saying, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?" It was, in that time and place, an insult, implying that his father was unknown.

But if Mary was initially a figure of scandal, we must also remember Joseph as a figure of faithful love. It's Matthew who tells us that Joseph was known as a righteous man who, nevertheless, claimed Mary's illegitimate child as his own. And from Luke we learn that Mary was as in love with God's plan for justice as was Tamar. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant... God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

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In each of these stories, we find the ultimate triumph of love. The stories of Rahab and Salmon, Ruth and Boaz, Joseph and Mary are all surrounded with traditions of long, happy marriages, the triumph of conjugal love. Rahab and Ruth are exemplars of familial love: Rahab saves her whole family; Ruth, her beloved mother-in-law. All of the women listed by Matthew bear and raise children and there is no reason to doubt that maternal love reigned in their lives. And all of these women show a spoken or unspoken thirst for the justice of God: Tamar, declared righteous by her father-in-law; Rahab, who proclaims Yahweh as the God of all; Ruth, who insists that Boaz redeem her late father-in-law's property for Naomi; Bathsheba, who ensures the elevation of her son, Solomon, to his father's throne; Mary, whose song of justice still rings in our ears two millennia later. In each story, justice, which is God's love for us, triumphs.

And I believe that we find in Jesus the triumph of all these loves as well. Jesus, who proclaims himself the Bridegroom, is our example of conjugal love. Jesus, who after his resurrection calls his disciples "brothers" and has died for them, is our example of familial love. Jesus is even our example of maternal love. Remember his words to Jerusalem? "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..." And Jesus, who called on his disciples to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and visit the prisoner, is clearly our example for the love of God's justice.

My sisters and my brothers, as we hear these "scandalous" stories this morning, consider how Matthew uses the memory of them to instruct us in love. We, too, are to love our spouses, our families, our children. And in this world, so characterized by greed and self-serving and callousness, we are to love "the least of these," Jesus' spiritual family and ours. In the week to come, as you celebrate love and the birth of the babe in Bethlehem, take time to hear the voice of the baby grown up and Jesus' call on all of us to love. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; One God and Mother of us all, Amen.