

“Liberating Women”

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Genesis 38:1-14

Luke 1:46-55

‘[Tamar] also realized that [Judah’s son,] Shelah was now a grown man,
but she had not been allowed to marry him.

So she decided to dress in something other than her widow's clothes...’

Genesis 38:14a

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for the women through the centuries and to this day
who have played important roles in the life of
the Church with a capital ‘C’ and this congregation.

Amen

One Christmas Eve service a few years back – during the lessons & carols,
I had asked a husband & wife to read the genealogy of Jesus Christ
as it is found in the Gospel of Matthew.

He had the bigger chore of saying all those
tongue-twister names of men in the ‘begats’,
while she had only five women’s names –
which she loudly proclaimed so as to interrupt
the monotony of all that masculinity.

Those women represented situations where there had been a threat
to the hereditary line of David up to and including Joseph
which they helped to save – all, that is, except for Mary
who broke the line once and for all.

And it so happens that the circumstances surrounding each of them
was some sort of scandal involving – you guessed it, sex.

Mary herself in choosing to cooperate with God’s mission was placed at risk
such that Joseph might’ve broken off their engagement
if he thought Mary had been unfaithful to him
and that the community would be scandalized
if they thought Joseph & Mary had their baby too early.

To Joseph’s credit, too, in this story, he proves worthy of his ancestors
by choosing to trust God and stand by his wife,
so that Christ enters the world not as the result of
human desire or design, but by God’s will to help us.

Bathsheba is referred to in Matthew only as ‘the wife of Uriah’,
with whom King David had an adulterous affair;
They later married and she gave birth to Solomon
who became an even greater king than his father.

Willard, p.2

Ruth was a foreigner, who had been married
to an Israelite man living in Moab.

When she became widowed, Ruth stayed with her mother-in-law, Naomi,
even as Naomi decided to return to Israel.

There, Ruth meets and marries Naomi's relative Boaz after an intimate interlude
on the threshing floor – something that involved 'his feet'.

Rahab was a prostitute who provided a safe haven for Joshua's spies
as the Israelites were entering Canaan to claim it as their promised land.
No dilly-dallying was involved – just the footnote of her notorious profession.

That brings us to Tamar who was married to the first son of Judah –
who himself was one of the original sons of Jacob.

As Nancy Bell shared with us from Genesis,
Tamar acted decisively to continue the line that would produce David.
You are probably wondering how that story turned out – OK. Spoiler alert!
Tamar seduced her father-in-law,
but was clever enough to ask for certain tokens from him
which served as insurance –
or black mail, depending on how you look at it,
when it was obvious that she was pregnant.

What these stories point out is the limited ways
that women had available to them to be part of the bigger story,
yet they demonstrated initiative, resourcefulness, and wisdom.

The stories of women in the Judeo-Christian tradition
are part of what UCC historian, Barbara Brown-Zigmond calls
'hidden histories' that keep the Church's history from being just 'his story'.

My Jewish storyteller colleague, Emily Harris, says that the Bible is written
with 'black fire' and 'white fire' –
it is the story written in lines of black ink,
but also the story written in between the lines
where the story of faithful women can often be found.

There has been a need for liberating women in the midst of the history
of our Church and society, but we also need to recognize how women
have been liberating the rest of us all along.

In recognizing one of our liberated and liberating women,
I've invited Betty Lee Sprague to share her wisdom with us
this morning...

*Our Jewish Testament lesson from Genesis 38:1-14,
tells about one of the five women mentioned in
the genealogy of Christ found in the Gospel of Matthew.
Tamar is the first of these women who each played an important role in maintaining
the line of descendants from Abraham to Jesus – who was born of Mary.*

¹...Judah left his brothers in the hill country
and went to live near his friend Hirah in the town of Adullam.

²While there he met the daughter of Shua, a Canaanite man.
Judah married her, ³and they had three sons.

He named the first one Er; ⁴she named the next one Onan.

⁵The third one was born when Judah was in Chezib,
and she named him Shelah.

⁶Later, Judah chose Tamar as a wife for Er, his oldest son.

⁷But Er was very evil, and the LORD took his life.

⁸So Judah told Onan,

"It's your duty to marry Tamar
and have a child for your brother."

⁹Onan knew the child would not be his,
and when he had sex with Tamar,
he made sure that she would not get pregnant.

¹⁰The LORD wasn't pleased with Onan
and took his life too.

¹¹Judah did not want the same thing to happen to his son Shelah,
and he told Tamar,

"Go home to your father and live there as a widow
until my son Shelah is grown."

So Tamar went to live with her father.

¹²Some years later Judah's wife died, and he mourned for her.

He then went with his friend Hirah to the town of Timnah,
where his sheep were being sheared.

¹³Tamar found out that her father-in-law Judah
was going to Timnah to shear his sheep.

¹⁴She also realized that Shelah was now a grown man,
but she had not been allowed to marry him.

So she decided to dress in something other than her widow's clothes
and to cover her face with a veil.

After this, she sat outside the town of Enaim on the road to Timnah.

*Our Gospel lesson from Luke 1:46-55, is what has been called The Magnificat –
Mary’s song of praise for God.*

*It is her spontaneous response to Elizabeth’s joyful celebration
that Mary will soon give birth to God’s anointed one – the Messiah.*

46Mary said:

“With all my heart I praise the Lord,
47and I am glad because of God my Savior.

48He cares for me, his humble servant.
From now on, all people will say God has blessed me.

49God All-Powerful has done great things for me,
and his name is holy.

50He always shows mercy
to everyone who worships him.

51The Lord has used his powerful arm
to scatter those who are proud.

52He drags strong rulers from their thrones
and puts humble people in places of power.

53God gives the hungry good things to eat,
and sends the rich away with nothing.

54He helps his servant Israel
and is always merciful to his people.

55The Lord made this promise to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his family forever!