



One Page Sermon

By Pastor Robb McCoy

December 3, 2023

The Grandmothers: Tamar

Recap of sermon from December 3, 2023

Scripture: Genesis 38:13-19, 24-27

The Pharisees asked Jesus when God's Kingdom would come. He told them a few parables, including one about a poor widow who was denied justice, but persisted in pestering the judge until he granted her justice. Perhaps Jesus was thinking of his Grandmother Tamar while he told the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8).

He must have known her story, and that she was the mother of Perez, whose line continued to King David and of course, to Joseph (Matthew 1). Tamar's story is not one that is told much these days. It comes in the middle of the more well-known story of Joseph and brothers. Wedged in between Judah and his brothers selling Joseph to traders on their way to Egypt, and Joseph gaining favor with Potiphar before getting entrapped by his wife, we get the story of Judah and Tamar.

It is a story with the cringe-factor turned up to 10. It is disturbing on many levels. For one, we are reminded that women's agency was extremely limited. We are dealing with a patriarchal society where women were extremely vulnerable. Yet through the difficult circumstances, Tamar's cunning and persistence brings her the justice she deserves.

Judah's oldest son marries Tamar, but he dies. To fulfill the levirate law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) she must marry Judah's second son. This is so that Tamar may live within the clan and get the protection that is due her. It is also to ensure that she may bear a son to "carry on" her husband's line. Onan, her second husband, realizes that giving his brother an heir would mean that his inheritance would be reduced to a third of Judah's estate instead of half. So he "spills his seed," (thus giving rise to the "Sin of Onan") so that his inheritance will not be further divided. As punishment of this evil deed, God strikes Onan down.

Now only one son remains, Shelah, but he is too young to marry. Judah then sends Tamar back to her home to wait until Shelah is of age. After some years pass, Shelah is old enough, and Tamar has not been recalled by Judah (he thinks she is cursed), so she plots her course. When Judah comes to her home town, she puts her plan into action.

She poses as a prostitute at the gate. He takes the bait and sleeps with her. As a deposit for payment she asks for his seal, cord, and staff (all of which would be unique to Judah. This is the ancient equivalent of leaving your ID for a bar tab).

Eventually Judah hears through the grapevine that his daughter-in-law Tamar is a prostitute, and she is pregnant. He cannot bear this shame upon his name, and decides to have her killed. Then she tells him, "I'm pregnant by the man who owns these things." When he realizes what has happened, he declares "She is more righteous than I."

It is a crazy story, to say the least. And lest you think, "well, it's really old, it was a different time," you should know, it was shocking then, too. And that is the point. Tamar is never judged for her action. In fact, she is deemed righteous. She was denied the justice that she deserved—that Torah demanded. In a patriarchal system that kept women in a perpetually vulnerable state, it was Judah's duty to protect her. When he failed, she did what she had to do.

Scholars and commentators have not been kind to Tamar. She has been called a sinner, and her inclusion in Jesus' genealogy a sign that he could redeem even a sinner such as her. Yet neither God nor anyone else in Scripture calls her a sinner. Instead, she is called righteous. She is the original persistent widow who demands—and receives—justice.

That the Torah includes this interlude in the Joseph story suggests that she saved not only herself, but helped the development of Judah. Here, he is able to see Tamar in a new light and grow from his mistake. Remember that he is the brother who sold Joseph, but later is the one who puts his life on the line for Benjamin.

That Matthew includes Tamar in the genealogy of Jesus suggests that she is a part of Jesus' life, ministry, and legacy. Jesus, the one who criticized the religious for "devouring widow's homes," who raised the widow's son, and told a story of a persistent widow, probably knew the story of Grandma Tamar as well.

We should remember her. Remember her predicament—the product of a patriarchal system. We should remember her persistence and her triumph.

Next Week is the second Sunday of Advent
The Grandmothers: Rahab, Joshua 2:1-21