

NEGLECTED CHARACTERS OF THE BIBLE: TAMAR

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 123:1-4
Genesis 38:1-30

I am continuing this morning with my series of sermons on some of the “little people of the Bible”—people who are mentioned briefly in the sacred texts, who walk upon the stage of Scripture for a word or two, and then recede into the background. I’m drawing on the work of Methodist Bishop William Willimon, who was long-time Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. As we’ve seen, these neglected characters of the Bible sometimes act in ways that just don’t fit our idea of how religious people are supposed to behave.

Take Tamar, for instance, the Canaanite woman whose story in Genesis 38 I read a moment ago, the Tamar who dupes her father-in-law, Judah, into having sex with her. One does not frequently hear sermons preached on Genesis 38. It’s a chapter that’s easy to miss, inserted as it is into the richly detailed and spiritually compelling narrative of Joseph, with his coat of many colors, who is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, only to end up as the virtual ruler of Egypt and savior of his entire family when seven years of plenty are followed by seven years of drought. Unlike Joseph’s saga, Tamar’s story seems more like a topic for Jerry Springer or Oprah than Sunday morning. It’s not obvious how this particular bit of Scripture could inspire or admonish or enlighten us. What are we to make of it?

The story begins with a woman, which is interesting in itself because, unfortunately, women get relatively short shrift in the Bible. And here, too, at first, the Bible seems uninterested in Tamar—as if she were just a casual bystander to the real story about men named Judah, his friend, Hirah, Judah’s sons, Er, Onan, Shelah. Did Judah have daughters? The story isn’t interested in daughters or wives. It’s about men, makers of history, doers of great things, heads of families. But that’s the problem—family. You can read the whole book of Genesis as a story about the problems of family. God has told Abraham that he is going to be the father of a great family, a family that will bless all the families of the earth. But that isn’t going to be easy because having a family for God isn’t easy; there are all sorts of difficulties and setbacks.

Here, Judah has arranged a marriage for his firstborn son, Er, with a local woman named Tamar. But Er dies before Tamar gets pregnant. Now in those days—perhaps 3,500 years ago—it was inconceivable that a woman could inherit her husband’s property. So, they had a system called the Levirate marriage laws,¹ which said that if a married man dies without an heir, then the closest male relative must marry the widow and have a baby with her so there will be an heir for the dead man’s estate. So following that law, Judah turns Tamar over to his second son. This sort of practice sounds strange, if not perverse to us, but it was a way, in a world where women had no rights and were

¹ cf. Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

terribly vulnerable, of providing for them by handing them on to the next son in line in the family.

Notice that nobody in the story is spending any time mourning Tamar's plight as a widow—alone and vulnerable. Nobody asks what Tamar may think about all this shuffling around from brother to brother. Judah tells Onan, next in line, to go take Tamar and have children. Onan disobeys, committing a “shameful act” of birth control because he knows that the baby, if there is one, will be considered his brother's and not his under the Levirate law. God is displeased and Onan.

After these two funerals, Judah says to Tamar, “Go on back to your father's house, woman. Maybe when my third son grows up, then you can marry him, but woman—you are bad luck.”

Tamar has been shuttled back and forth throughout the story, through a succession of funerals, and husbands, and now she is sent home. End of story. Tragic. Dead end. Yet, if you know much about the history of women in any culture you would have to say that it's not a particularly unusual or original story. Dependent, of value only as child-bearers and husband caretakers, a mere backdrop for what men will or will not do, this has been the traditional, conventional story of women. This is just another telling of the same of tale. Too bad, but that's the way the world is. But because this is the Bible, where nearly anything can happen and often does, this story continues and takes on a very different cast.

Years go by. Judah's wife dies—Judah, the father-in-law whose sons weren't much help to Tamar. Not long after the funeral, Judah happens to be up at Timnah for the sheep shearing and, after the sheep are sheared, old Judah goes out with the boys for a night on the town.

Tamar at last arises out of her culturally imposed, patriarchally sanctioned passivity and takes matters in hand. She throws off her mourning clothes, splashes some cheap perfume behind each ear, puts a veil on her face, and heads for the red light district of Timnah where she prepares to take old Judah in hand.

Judah sees her but, of course, doesn't recognize his ex-daughter-in-law because of the veil. They haggle over a price and agree on one young goat, the standard fee for such services. But Tamar, having dealt with men in this family before, asks for some collateral. She asks Judah to leave his signet ring, his belt, and his staff with her until he pays up with the goat. These are marks of identity. Sort of like asking for his driver's license and credit cards.

The deal is done. A few days later, when Judah's friend shows up with the goat looking for the perfumed harlot to pay, he can't find her. Judah says, “Aw, let her keep it.” His male ego doesn't want to risk a public bruising for having been taken by a whore. So, he goes home after his escapades at the sheep-shearing convention with a hangover and without belt, staff, and ring—sadder but wiser.

Six months later, Judah hears the gossip that his ex-daughter-in-law is pregnant because she has been working as a prostitute. Well, Judah is utterly indignant. As an upstanding pillar of God's holy people Israel, a patriarch of the church, the family through which God plans to bless all the families of the earth, Judah can't have his

daughter-in-law, ex or not, embarrassing the family name. In a singular act of righteous indignation, Judah says, “Bring her here to be burned. It will teach her a lesson.”

They bring back Tamar, who is wearing maternity clothes. She is obviously, unashamedly, in a family way.

“Do you have anything to say before we make an example of you for all our womenfolk by burning you alive?” Judah asks.

“Well, I do want to say just one thing,” says Tamar. “The man to whom these things belong is the father of my child.” And she produces the ring (with a big “J” on it), the staff, the belt.

And Judah says, “Oops. Put away the torches and the gasoline. Court is over.”

“You don’t want us to uphold community morals?” one of his people asks.

“I said court is over!” shouts Judah. “She is within her rights rather than I.” Or, to translate it more accurately, “she is more righteous than I.”

And that’s an amazing statement for old Judah to make about Tamar.

Judah, as a man, father of the family, patriarch, has all the rights. Tamar—woman, widow, unmarried, childless—has no rights. She is outside the law, without legal recourse. That ought to be the end of the story, the legal, proper, appropriate end. Moral of that story: all you disenfranchised, disinherited people on the bottom better obey the rules or you’ll get burned—rules, please notice, which are usually made by people on the top.

But, as I said, this is the Bible, so that’s not the end. The story moves on to what Professor Walter Brueggemann calls a “fresh definition of righteousness.”² Who is guilty now? Show him the ring, the staff, the belt. It will teach him a lesson.

What is the lesson that Judah and we are meant to learn from this odd Bible story about this little person on the bottom? In this story, Tamar is—surprise!—vindicated. She bears twins, Perez and Zerah. The family will be continued, there will be a future where once there was none, but not in the respectable, middle-class way Judah intended. God’s family will be preserved through the crafty, chutzpa of a gutsy woman named Tamar.

If there’s a moral here, a point of edification for all us good churchgoing people, it is not the one we wanted. Tamar has committed those sins which good church people condemn: deception, illicit sex, disrespect for authority. Judah reacts, at first, as the world reacts: with indignant condemnation. Let her burn!

This story doesn’t glorify Tamar or even justify her action. But you do have to admire the way she takes matters (and Judah) in hand, the way she wrenches a future for herself out of the clutches of male oppression masquerading as religious propriety. She doesn’t whine about her circumstances or quietly resign herself to her situation. She goes out and wheels and deals, recklessly risking all, and thus suggests a new sort of righteousness. You’ve got to hand it to Tamar.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis* (Louisville, KY:John Knox Press, 1986), 310.

We have our tit-for-tat “righteousness,” our vindictiveness that is usually most vindictive toward those on the bottom with those at the top calling all the shots and benefiting the most from the officially sanctioned definitions of “righteous.” But it appears that God is above and beyond our definitions and our righteousness.

But even so, why bring up such an embarrassing story, a story that doesn’t even mention God—except as the one who killed Tamar’s first two husbands? Why spend a whole Sunday sermon discussing this woman? Savvy, yes. Wise to the ways of the world, yes. But for all that, still a deceptive, lying harlot. Why bring her up, and on a Sunday, too?

Because Matthew brings her up. Matthew, the first gospel—you can look it up, right at the beginning of his first chapter: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar.”³

So, you see: the great-great-grandmother of Jesus was Tamar. If we hadn’t had Tamar, we couldn’t have had Jesus. And when Jesus called forth a new family, based on new, risky righteousness, wouldn’t his great-grandmother have been proud?

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.

³ Matthew 1:1-3.