

Dec. 11, 2005
Matthew 1:1-17
First Parish Church
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Root of Faith

(Before the scripture reading)

You won't find today's scripture lesson in the lectionary, (the assigned readings for each Sunday). However, it is the very beginning of the New Testament as it is now compiled in the Bible. The opening words of Matthew are *the book of the genesis of Jesus*. Just as the Hebrew scriptures begin with the genesis of all creation, the New Testament begins with the genesis of Jesus. Matthew begins with his version of the genealogy of Jesus.

I first got cued in to "the begats" as some of us have heard them called, back in seminary. During a study group session, two members of the group got into a heated discussion about whether or not all passages of scripture are of equal value. One person argued that all passages are equally important. The other person arguing that some passages are more important than others, said, "You mean reading the begats can be spiritually meaningful?" Well, I'm counting on it today.

This will be an unusual scripture reading because I want us to be able to visualize that we are talking about real people who passed on the gift of life from one generation to the next. So I'm inviting some of you to participate in this reading. We need 41 men and 5 women to help with this reading. During the

hymn, those of you who are willing to participate please come forward.

(singing "Gentle Joseph, Joseph Dear" then read the names of the genealogy.)

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About a month ago I went with four other members of the church to a human sexuality seminar where we talked about how to talk with children. We reminded ourselves that first of all it's always important to know exactly what they are asking. For instance, a young boy asks his father, "Where did I come from?" The father begins to blush, stammers a bit, but gathers up his courage and explains, as best he can, about human procreation. As the father talks, the boy looks increasingly puzzled. When the father finishes, the boy says, "That's weird. I was just talking with Timmy, and he said he came from Pittsburgh."

Matthew's genealogy responds, in a different way, to the question "Where did Jesus come from?" I suppose Matthew could have just said, "Jesus came from Nazareth." But, for his listeners, that leaves too much unsaid.

At this time of year, whether we want to or not, most of us find ourselves thinking of our family connections, our family trees. This usually brings a mixture of memories and feelings – some joyous and some not.

I wonder what it was like for Jesus, when he was little, to learn about and visit his extended family. Do you suppose, that as he and his parents prepared to travel to Jerusalem for the high holy days, that their household had a bit of the flavor of our Christmas rush – getting the house clean before you leave, arranging for someone to take care of the animals, figuring out what to pack for the trip, what presents to take to give to relatives they would see on the way. Maybe Joseph was saying to Mary, “Maybe we should give them new wineskins this year.” Mary responding, “No, I think we did that a couple of years ago.” Joseph, sighing, “Oh, yeah.”

And I wonder if Jesus might have piped in, “Do we have to visit Aunt Rachel again this year? She pinches my cheeks so tight and she smells funny.” Ah yes, families.... The wonders and the struggles of being family are heightened during the holy days, the holidays.

Jesus would have first learned of his heritage from Joseph and Mary. They would have told him who he was and whose he was. And that’s what Matthew is telling us. The first thing Matthew declares is that Jesus is The Anointed (The Messiah, The Christ) – one claimed by God and sent by God. Matthew goes on to affirm that this gift from God, this Jesus, has come to the world through the Jewish community. God, who has been in covenant with the Jewish people from the time of Abraham, has brought forth an heir to the promise of Abraham. This heir is also the “new king,” “the king of Jews,” that the people have been hoping for since the time of the great King David. One of this gospel’s special aims

is to present Jesus as the legitimate heir to the royal house of David. Although we know that he will rule in a very different way.

The writer of Matthew wants us to know that Jesus came from within the Jewish community but Matthew also wants us to know that Jesus is a gift to the whole world.

Matthew gives us unexpected hints in this direction through his inclusion of five women in his genealogy. I would have expected him to include the matriarchs, like Sarah and Rebecca, but he doesn’t. He includes: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba), and then Mary. Each of these women has a rich and textured story, but one of the things that the first four share is that they are outsiders to the Jewish community. They are foreigners, either by birth or by their marriage to foreigners. Through their inclusion in the genealogy of Jesus we are reminded that the good news of Jesus is not exclusive. This good news is not only for a particular people. God is not interested in a “blue blood” lineage. God’s blessing in the Christ is meant for all the people.

In the coming weeks you may see an ad on TV for our denomination, the United Church of Christ. It depicts a young girl, saying, “Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door and see all the people.”

“ All the people.
God accepts all the people.
So do we.
The United Church of Christ.
No matter who you are
or where you are on life’s journey
you’re welcome here.”

Each of the women – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah, and Mary - at some time found herself at a rough spot on life's journey, and yet they are all welcome on Jesus' family tree. These women did not live fairy tale lives...you know, girl meets boy, girl marries boy, and lives happily ever after. Each of them finds themselves at some point in a compromised or compromising position. They also find themselves way out on slender and precarious limbs of the tree of power dynamics in their culture. Yet, in each story, each woman becomes an agent of God's activity in the world.

Consider Mary for a moment. As Matthew's story goes, she finds herself in an unconventional pregnancy. Her very life is in danger. Joseph could have had her stoned, or at least divorced her quietly. But as the story goes on to say, Joseph is a righteous man, - one who is right with God. Joseph takes Mary into his home and, more importantly, he takes Mary and Jesus into his heart.

All the generations, from Abraham, through King David, have brought us down to Joseph, and his wife Mary, who as we will hear in next week's cantata, all future generations will call blessed.

Through Mary comes Jesus. In some respects the interest in a biological genealogy ends here. For, despite the interest of some, including Dan Brown in his book *The Da Vinci Code*, the legacy Jesus leaves us is not a legacy of biology. In fact he says, "Those who do the will of God are my mother, and my brothers," and my sisters, and my father, and my children.

The will of God welcomes outsiders.
The will of God speaks truth to the principalities and powers.
The will of God forgives and transforms into new life.

Jesus' ministry, just like Jesus' genealogy, includes the flawed and the afflicted, the obscure and the famous. Isn't it likely then that God is using us, we real people, with our real flaws and real gifts – that God is using us in some mysterious and unexpected ways, right here, right now.

Miriam Therese Winter prays that it is so in her poem...

*Root of Jesse
rising
from many an ancient prophecy*

*promised child
to all who would be reconciled
breaks through at last.*

...
*Lord, you are stem, stalk, tree!
Let your fruit take root in me.*

(Imaging the Word, V. 2, pg. 85)