

July 6 2014

## Scripture Lessons ~

*Psalm 145:8-14*

*Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

## Sermon

Today I want to talk about someone who has probably gone unnoticed by most Christians.

Genesis 38:1-27,

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and settled near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her. She conceived and bore a son; and he named him Er. Again she conceived and bore a son whom she named Onan. Yet again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah. She was in Chezib when she bore him.

Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, 'Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother.' But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also. Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up'—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

In course of time the wife of Judah, Shula's daughter, died; when Judah's time of mourning was over, he went up to Timnah to his sheep-shearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. When Tamar was told, 'Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep', she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He went over to her at the roadside, and said, 'Come, let me come in to you'; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law.

She said, 'What will you give me, that you may come in to me?'

He answered, 'I will send you a kid from the flock.'

And she said, 'Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it.'

He said, 'What pledge shall I give you?'

She replied, ‘Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand.’ So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. He asked the townspeople, ‘Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?’

But they said, ‘No prostitute has been here.’

So he returned to Judah, and said, ‘I have not found her; moreover, the townspeople said, “No prostitute has been here.” ’

Judah replied, ‘Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her.’

About three months later Judah was told, ‘Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom.’

And Judah said, ‘Bring her out, and let her be burned.’

As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, ‘It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.’ And she said, ‘Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.’

Then Judah acknowledged them and said, ‘She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.’ And he did not lie with her again. When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb.

Into the wonderfully instructive, edifying narrative of Joseph is introduced this marvelously uninstructive story of a woman named Tamar who dupes her father-in-law, Judah, into having sex with her. I’m aware that this subject is seldom spoken about in church. I’m aware that many of you came to church this morning fully expecting to be admonished, morally edified, and ethically enlightened.

Well, what do you make of this?

The story begins with a woman, which is interesting in itself because, unfortunately, there are not too many stories about woman in the good old patriarchal Bible. First, the story seems uninterested in her as if she is just a casual bystander to the real story about a man named Judah, his friend, Hirah, and Judah’s sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. Did Judah have daughter? This story isn’t about the daughters or wives. It’s about men, makers of history, doers of great things, and heads of families.

But that’s the problem—**Family**. You could read the whole book of Genesis if you wanted to as a story about the problem 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 all sorts of difficulties and setbacks.

Here, Judah has given a woman named Tamar to be the wife of Er, his firstborn. But Er died before Tamar conceives. So, following the Levirate marriage laws. ( Duet. 25:5-10), which says that if a married man dies without a heir, then the next male kin must marry the widow, impregnate her, provide an heir-(it being inconceivable that the widow should inherit her husband's goods). So Judah turns Tamar over to his next son, Onan. I know that this sort of practice sounds strange, but it was a way, in a world where women had no rights and were terribly vulnerable, of providing for them by handing them on to the next son in line in the family.

Note that nobody in the story lingers to mourn over Tamar's plight as a widow; she is alone and vulnerable. Nobody ponders what Tamar may think about all this shuffling around from unproductive brother to unfaithful brother. Judah tells Onan, next in line, to go take Tamar and have children. Onan disobeyed and as an act of birth control spilled his seed "on the ground" because he knew that the baby would be considered to be his brother's and not his own. This displeased God and God slew him.

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, but woman you are bad luck."

Tamar is 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 the traditional, conventional story of women. It's one of those stories. But because this is the Bible, where nearly anything can happen and often does, this story continues and takes on a different cast.

Judah's wife dies—Judah, the father-in-law whose sons weren't much help to Tamar. Judah happens to be up at Timnah for 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 morning clothes, dabs on a little perfume behind each ear, puts a veil on her face, and heads for the red light district of Timnah where she looks for old Judah.

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.

It's a done deal. A few days later, when Judah's friend shows up with the goat looking for the perfumed harlot to pay, he couldn't find her. Judah says, "Let her keep the ring, belt and staff lest she make a fool of me". He went home after his escapades at the sheep-shearing convention with a hangover, without a 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 progenitor of God's holy people, Israel, a patriarch of the church, the family through which God plans to bless all the families of the world, Judah can't have his daughter-in-law, ex or not, embarrassing the family name. In a singular act of religious indignation, Judah says, "Bring her here to be burned. It will teach her a lesson."

They bring back Tamar. 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 asked.

"Well, I do want to say one thing," said Tamar. "The man to whom these things belong is father of my child." And she produces the ring, the staff, the belt.

And Judah said, "Opps. She has taught me a lesson. Court is over. Put away the torches and the gasoline."

"You don't want us to uphold community morals?" one of the people asked.

"I said court is over!" shouts Judah. "She is more righteous than I." Judah said that because apparently by this time his third son, Shelah, had grown up and Judah had not sent him to Tamar.

In this story Judah, as a man, father of the family, patriarch, had all the rights. Tamar, a woman, widow, unmarried, childless, had no rights. She is outside of 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, which you will note, are usually made by people on the top.

But, as I said, this is the Bible, so that's not the end. The story continues and takes a fresh look at the people involved. Who is guilty now? Show him the ring, the belt, the staff. 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 (*surprise*) is 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, chutpa of a gutsy woman named Tamar.

If there's a moral here, a point of edification for all of us good church going people, it is not the one we wanted. Tamar has committed those sins which good

bourgeois church people condemn, deception, illicit sex. Judah reacts, at first as the world reacts; indignant condemnation. Let her burn!

Reminds you of King David and the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1-6).  
“*The man who has done this deserves to die*” says David.

“*You are the man!*” Says Nathan... A woman was involved there, too. “She is more righteous than I,” King David needed to say, though he didn’t.

I didn’t say that this story glorifies Tamar or justifies her actions. But you do have to admire the way she takes matters (and Judah) into her own hands, 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 resigns herself to her situation. She goes out and wheels and deals, recklessly risking all, and thus suggests a new kind of righteousness. You’ve got to hand it to Tamar.

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

But even so, why would we 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 would we spend this important time together thinking and talking about this woman? Forget Tamar! She was wise in the ways of the world, yes. But for all that she was still a deceptive lying harlot. Why bring her up, and on a Sunday, too?

Why? Why because Matthew brings her up. Matthew, the first gospel—you can look it up: “*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 Zerath by Tamar.*” (Mt. 1:1-3)

Now it can be told. The great, great, many times great grandmother of Jesus was Tamar. If we hadn’t had Tamar, we wouldn’t have had Jesus. So when Jesus called forth a new family, based on new, risky righteousness, wouldn’t this great ancestor grandmother have been proud.