

The Enigma of Righteousness

Genesis 38:20-26; Ecclesiastes 8:16-9:1
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In the opening chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the writer begins with a lengthy genealogy. It includes a long list of Jesus' male ancestors, going back to David and ultimately Abraham. However, within the list are four women mentioned by name, and a fifth only alluded to.

The women mentioned are Tamar, a Canaanite, who is celebrated for saving the line of Judah and whose story is referred to as one of the most famous cases of incest in the Bible; Rahab a prostitute from the city of Jericho, credited with helping the Hebrews spies; Ruth, a non-Israelite from an enemy nation of Moab; Bathsheba, who is alluded to as "the mother of Solomon, wife of Uriah", whose scandalous account we well know; and finally, Mary - mother of Jesus, surrounded by her own controversy. While many of the male ancestors had their moments of infamy, it is striking that every women in Jesus' genealogy had a fascinating and controversial story. For now, we will look at Tamar's account.

Our first reading today only provided you with a portion of Genesis chapter 38. The chapter contains 30 verses that recount a shocking tale surrounding Judah, one of Jacob's 12 sons, the namesake of the nation of Israel, and his Canaanite daughter-in-law, Tamar. At the beginning of the chapter we read that Judah's wife bears him three children named Er, Onan and Shelah. The first son marries Tamar, and shortly thereafter is "killed by God" for unspecified reasons. As was a custom, Judah then gives Tamar to Onan, his second son. However, Onan does not wish to provide an heir on behalf of his deceased brother and fragment the inheritance assets. He does not impregnate Tamar and is also "struck down by God."

Judah, now afraid of losing his third and last son, avoids giving Tamar to Shelah—effectively condemning Tamar to the obscurity of widowhood. This prompts Tamar to take matters into her own hands. By this time, Judah's own wife has passed away, so at stake is the continuation of Judah's line. This is significant since the story was written after the time of King David. Tamar anticipates Judah will be returning from the town of Timnah and awaits him in the guise of a prostitute. He falls for the ruse, but as he has no form of payment; he leaves her his identifying seal, cord and staff as an assurance of payment. When he later sends someone with payment, the servant cannot find her and Judah dismisses the search to avoid bringing undue attention upon himself.

Three months later, Judah is informed that Tamar has committed adultery. He immediately orders her to a death by burning. Whereupon, she sends him the identifying items he left her, saying that the owner of the items is the father of her unborn child. With this public attestation, Judah cannot impose judgment upon her. Rather, he utters the unexpected statement of acquittal, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." Tamar is exonerated, and some months later gives birth to twin boys. So the line of Judah is continued.

Tamar represents a marginal figure—a Canaanite, a woman, widowed, childless or at least no male heirs. She is the party with a considerable amount to lose as well as a lot to gain through her risky actions. She is an outsider motivated by a sense of injustice and is declared more righteous than a patriarch. The compilers of ancient memories particularly liked stories such as this one.

Some years ago I decided that if I had to choose one text to preach on, and had an adventurous audience, I would choose Genesis 38. While one of the more distressing if not poignant stories in the Hebrew Bible, its full meaning, and its strange insertion into the much longer Story of Joseph, still presents a mystery to scholars. It is not typically addressed in the pulpit since the passage is excluded from the lectionary; however, it might surprise you to know that church fathers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, both lectured and commented on the Tamar narrative. So, rest assured, were in good company.

This story of Tamar revolves around a practice called Levirate Marriage. The custom held that if a man died, his brother or near relative should marry his widow in order to produce a male heir. His brother's widow would then have assets with which to support herself and the rest of her female children. This practice and related ones are still practiced in many societies. Unfortunately, abuses of authority that exacerbate the vulnerability of widows are a dire issue of injustice worldwide.

I took time to provide the background because in fact, the pervasive violation of widows and their inheritance rights is one of the current international issues on the Human Rights Watch list. It continually affects millions of women and the children they are left to support. One African commentator noted in response to Genesis 38, that while the “growth of monogamy and the devastation caused by AIDS has led to the abandonment of the idea of widow inheritance in Africa...that does not mean that we are not under an obligation to support a dead brother's wife. Mistreating a brother's widow is like fighting God himself.” Judah's decision not to provide for Tamar is a misuse of power, which would leave her with no future, no means of support. We recognize the voice of many through the voice of Tamar, and in doing so give dignity to the desperate struggle of millions of women worldwide. While the story strikes a cord with so many today, there is something else I find compelling about the story.

For the many Christians who view scripture as inspired on some level, and look towards it to determine some standard for faithful living, passages like this one have historically posed a challenge, even when taken within its cultural setting. For instance, what preoccupied Luther and Calvin and others were questions of morality and ethics, as well as theological ones. Questions such as why did God kill Er; was Tamar's sin adultery or fornication; why did Judah commend her to death by fire (when it should have been death by stoning). Scholars worked to determine exactly what sins each person committed. Early rabbis lost themselves in discussions over the exact nature of the veil Tamar wore when seducing Judah.

What complicates Judah and Tamar's actions to early Jewish and Christian commentators is that the Torah both forbids and advocates Levirate marriage. In Leviticus 18:16 and

20:21, the Torah forbade a brother to marry his sister-in-law, while Deuteronomy 25 advocated just such a practice. In addition, they were befuddled by Judah's statement of acquittal when he is exposed as the father of Tamar's unborn child and declares "she is more righteous than I..." This proved hard to reconcile theologically, but Luther and Calvin took pains to do so. They even managed to connect Gen 38 with the mystery of the Incarnation. For Luther, Tamar represented evidence of the "universality of God's saving purpose" calling her "the mother of Christ," and an "extraordinary woman". Calvin concluded, as had Luther, that there is no wickedness that Christ cannot redeem.

As it turns out, righteousness is a thorny if not elusive idea. Despite the more than 500 occurrences of words relating to the Hebrew root righteous or righteousness, we cannot narrow down its meaning to a singular idea. Interpretations relate to ideas such as integrity, vindication, health of soul, and behavior that is fitting into a proper, perhaps universal order, and strongly connected with justice. It's a standard for relationships to which even God held.

In rhetorical Hebrew literature—such as the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, the ancient philosophers challenged assumptions about what makes one "righteous". Right living or right standing before God was such that the preacher of Ecclesiastes argued it was not formulaic, or found solely in religious practice or outward behavior. He questioned that it could be known at all. The question for these ancient "progressives" revolved around how then to determine morality and what constituted sin.

What is clear from a brief look at righteousness is that it is ambiguous and never clearly delineated—it is determined by both the individual and in relationship to a community. It is sometimes based in actions that seek restitution in the immediate sense and does not await a future salvation. It is highly motivated by a sense of injustice. It might demand taking risks, and a willingness to be judged openly by peers or debated by theologians much later.

The ideas embodied in the pursuit of righteousness should resonate with us. We are comfortable living with ambiguity. We have been influenced by—or are indeed part of—a Liberal movement and progressive approach within Christianity. This approach reflects Christians who share a desire for honest discussion; who accept the fallibility of creeds; who advocate a broad-minded approach to scripture and its historical critical study; who disdain tired expressions that neatly resolve ambiguity; who insist on the importance of individual piety and recognize religious pluralism.

Part of the challenge of progressive Christianity is that it is more difficult to explain or justify our positions to others, or perhaps we don't feel the need to do so. We are less likely to attempt to project an expectation of right living for others, much less ourselves.

When we try to construct a moral basis for living from a progressive or liberal approach, some criticize such efforts as culturally-dependant and resorting to expediency. Determining right behavior continues to be sticky. It is underscored by the fact that philosophers have had an ongoing dialogue for decades over the existence of moral

absolutes. Richard Rorty, one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century, challenged the idea of moral absolutes and the degree to which we appeal to a religious moral code. He pushed for honest reflection as to whether or not we make decisions—be they major or routine—based on principles or pragmatism. His work has prompted a conversation amongst religious thinkers.

The gray areas that we are more acutely aware of sometimes make us hesitant to address issues in our culture. In Douglas Ottati's recent book, *Theology for Liberal Presbyterians and other Endangered Species*, he discusses the challenges facing a progressive Christian. He notes that, "as finite and limited creatures endowed with considerable capacities for knowledge and imagination, action and intervention, we regularly find that the things we value...are set within a world of changing circumstances, the unpredictable actions of others, and unanticipated consequences. We find that the things we value are contingent and that there is no human action without risk."

Part of the challenge lies in our strong emphasis on personal piety which is an important feature of our faith tradition and the post-modern reality in our society. However, it can cause us to be quiet about our faith and for faith communities to be internally focused. We are reluctant to relate our faith to larger issues and concerns within our society. We are often unwilling to risk voicing a path as righteous. *It is easy for progressive faith to be nominal faith.*

There are those who argue that mainline Christianity is on the demise. By some projections, most mainline churches will have closed their doors by 2050. Those projections do not imply the death of Christianity. However, it does imply that we are not offering a strong voice conveying a reforming faith, which actively responds to our society and culture and engages our most pressing issues. Such faith is not without risk, and most certainly requires courage.

To do so requires us to explore what we mean by our creeds and doctrine. What values and worldviews we truly believe these convey, and how they inform our actions. We must discuss with, and interpret to this generation what we really mean by such doctrine as sin, atonement, salvation, and redemption. If we do not have such dialogues within and without our community, then we risk passing on ritual and ambiguity alone to the next generation. There are many who need to hear our voices in discussion.

Righteousness challenges notions of a prescribed religion and an external deity, and pushes towards—as one theologian put it—a God grounded in being itself. Perhaps it should be understood as much in its pursuit, as in society's judgment. Righteousness is best found in the nexus of honesty and action, of faith and uncertainty.

Thanks be to God. Amen.