

THE LITTLE PEOPLE OF THE BIBLE: TAMAR, A MARGINALIZED WOMAN

Genesis 38:1-30; Matthew 1:1-16

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson

Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA

July 14, 2002

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

How in the world did Tamar's story get in the Bible? She not only plays a minor role, she plays a questionable role. She doesn't fit in with our idea of how religious people are supposed to act. One old commentary frankly states her story is entirely inappropriate for preaching! I don't agree. The very fact that the story is about a woman makes it interesting because, unfortunately, there aren't too many stories about women in the good old patriarchal Bible. The Bible seems primarily interested in men, big men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. So pay close attention when the Bible tells a story about a woman. Tamar is not only a woman; she's a *Canaanite* woman. She doesn't even belong in the family of Judah. Tamar is a "marginalized" woman.

Listen to a retelling of the two-act story. In the first act, Judah has three sons. He takes a Canaanite wife, Tamar, for his first son whom the Lord kills because of some unspecified wickedness leaving Tamar widowed and childless. According to Middle Eastern marriage laws Tamar is given to Judah's second son who's required to father a child that will be legally considered the child of his dead brother. Onan doesn't want to father a kid that won't be considered his. If Tamar has a child by him, Onan will get only a third of his father's inheritance instead of half. So Onan practices a form of birth control. The Lord kills him - not for practicing birth control - but because he's selfish. Having lost two sons, Judah thinks, "This girl's bad luck! I'm not going risk my remaining son" (which he was obligated to do). So he says to Tamar, "Get out! Go back to your parents! Maybe, just maybe, when my third son is old enough I'll give you to him (but don't hold your breath)." Tamar goes back to her parents. She's twice widowed and childless, all of which is to say that she has no legal rights, no means of income, no health insurance, no retirement plan and she can't inherit property.

So far Tamar is absolutely passive. No one mourns when her husbands die. No one asks how she feels about being shuttled back and forth between Judah's sons and her parents. She's basically a "nothing". If the story had ended at this point it would be like the stories of the vast majority of women who've ever lived. Women often tell me that their parents treated them as less valuable than their sons. "Graduate, get married, have kids but whatever you do, don't embarrass the family by getting into trouble".

But the story doesn't end there. In Act Two, time has passed. Tamar begins to take initiative. She uses her brains. She acts in a way that subverts her culturally bound servitude. She uses imagination and entrepreneurial skills to assure her welfare. By now, Judah's third son is grown up and Tamar realizes Judah has no intention of giving her to him. Just about that time, she hears that her father-in-law is going to the annual sheep shearing convention. This was an annual affair where men go to an out of town convention center under the pretense of shearing sheep. There they eat and drink too much, and sometimes do really stupid things:

Tamar is aware of what goes on at these conventions and she has some knowledge of Judah's character. So she put off her widow's garments and puts on a red dress secretly purchased at Victoria's Secret. She pours on perfume and wears an alluring veil so Judah won't recognize her. Judah, in the meantime, has been eating and drinking too much and decides to take a late night walk where he meets what he thinks is a hooker. The words of the old Ray Charles classic come to his mind, "See the girl with the red dress on." Judah propositions her. "Let's spend the night together! I'll give you a goat?" Judah seems to be far more familiar with how to carry out such a transaction than what you might expect from a godly patriarch.

"Where's the goat?" Tamar asks, wondering if he might be referring to himself.

"Oh, I didn't bring it. I'll see that you get it tomorrow."

Tamar wasn't born yesterday so she insists that Judah hand over his ring, belt, and staff as collateral. That's like giving a stranger your passport, driver's license and Visa card. Judah, like an

idiot, agrees. In the morning he wakes up and Tamar's gone. Judah goes back to the convention center and sends his friend with a goat to retrieve his valuables. But his friend can't find Tamar. "She's disappeared", his friend says. "Should I call the police?"

Judah responds, "Let's keep this quiet. She can keep my stuff. If news gets out we'll never live it down. Not only that they'll kick me off the session." So Judah travels home without his belt, ring, or staff. I wonder how he explained that back home.

Three months pass. A servant tells Judah, "Did you hear about Tamar? She got herself pregnant." Judah is the patriarch of the village and like Gary Condit and Newt Gingrich he's got to uphold community and family values. And Tamar still legally belongs to him. "Bring her out! Burn her at the stake." So they build a bonfire and the whole village gathers to watch the execution of justice. They bring Tamar out and just before they throw her in she says, "Oh! Be sure that the father of my baby gets his staff, ring, and belt." And she displays a long wooden staff with a big "J" carved in the handle. Judah turns beet red and shouts, "Douse the fire!" The crowd responds, "What about community standards and family values? You gotta do what's right." The patriarch then says something remarkable. "She is more in the right than I."

I've drawn three lessons from Tamar's story.

First, God wants us to listen to the voices of marginalized people like Tamar. Her story interrupts the rags to riches story of Joseph as if to say, "Listen to the story of a little person as well as well as the story of a big person like Joseph." When I was a boy we learned about Columbus but didn't hear much about the devastating affect colonization had on the Native American Indians. We learned about George Washington and Thomas Jefferson but didn't hear that their achievements were made possible by slave labor. Tamar's story tells us God wants us to listen to the voices of marginalized people. We might not like what they're saying. We might condemn their lifestyles. But God wants us to listen. Notice that the Bible tells Tamar's story without making any moral judgments on her behavior (which the rest of the Bible makes clear is sinful). Some people stiffly criticize the

PCUSA for listening to voices of marginalized people. Let them! Our brief statement of faith says, "In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, *to hear the voices of peoples long silenced*, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace." God wants us to listen to the story of marginalized men and women.

Secondly, Tamar's story teaches us to use our brains in our pursuit of justice, freedom and peace. Don't passively submit to oppression! Take initiative in righting the wrongs of society! Tamar was powerless and without legal rights yet she took initiative to achieve justice for herself. You have to admire the way she wrenches a future for herself out of the clutches of male oppression masquerading as religious propriety. So take initiative in the pursuit of justice for yourself and for marginalized people.

Thirdly, Tamar's story teaches the truth of the old Blues song popularized by Eric Clapton:

~~"Before you 'cuse me, better take a look at yourself."~~ Tamar committed sins which good middle class church people condemn. Judah reacts, first, the way the church often acts. "Burn her!" But, Judah has a humiliating change of heart when he sees himself as God sees him. Who are the people we condemn? Tamar's story makes it possible for us to imagine that God *just might* consider people whose lifestyles we condemn to be more righteous than we upstanding people are?

Finally, Tamar, one of God's little people, a Canaanite woman, becomes the ancestor of Israel's greatest king, David. Better yet, this gutsy little woman who refused to submit to her oppressive culture became the great, great, great, great grandmother of Jesus. Read about her in the genealogy in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Without Tamar, we wouldn't have Jesus. And without Jesus we'd all be in a lot worse shape than we are now. Without the little people, there'd be no big people.

Almighty God, again and again you have called upon little people to force change or fire human hopes. Never let big people be so set in their ways that they refuse to hear the voices of little people, or so firm in their grip on power that they reject the contributions little people have to make. Let the little people be candid, but not cruel. Keep them dreaming dreams that you approve and living in the spirit of Jesus who was marginalized when he was taken outside the city and crucified. Now he is risen to rule the world and has become our savior. In his name we pray. Amen.