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THE PAPER TOWEL DISPENSER PROBLEM

Matthew 1:1-17

I occasionally wonder if my grandchildren might grow up never learning how to actually make some things work. I had this thought while going through airports recently on our vacation trip. You go to the restroom and the toilet flushes itself, you put your hands under the faucet and water just magically comes out, you wave your hand under a paper towel dispenser and out comes the towel. Will kids learn how to flush toilets, turn the water on and operate a dispenser? This is not a huge concern. I don't lose sleep over it. But don't you wonder?

There is a big catch with all this restroom automation. It doesn't always work the way it's supposed to. It's really frustrating to put your hand under the faucet and have nothing happen. Or wave your hand under the paper towel dispenser and it just sits there doing nothing and saying, "Are you talking to me?" I end up waving my hands all over the place trying to get some kind of a response. I felt kind of dumb when a guy walked in and I was waving my arms around like a wild man. The guy probably thought I was loony tunes.

It occurs to me that sometimes in life we look like that. It feels to us like life isn't working and we start going through all kinds of histrionics trying to get it to respond and operate the way we think it should. We look like crazy people when we go to extremes trying to make it work. This morning as we launch into the season where we celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ into this world we are going to look at a part of the Bible that seems the very definition of dull and irrelevant, but will find out it actually has a message, and that message can help us settle down and relax. Let's look at Matthew 1:1-17.

WE NEED YOUR CREDENTIALS

Someone with no familiarity with the Bible who determines to read through the New Testament from front to back will be confronted with a somewhat off putting passage right off the bat. That person will open the first page of the book of Matthew and read such scintillating verses as "Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon." Uh, does this have something to do with a zoo? I see mention of a ram and a salmon in there, so it sounds like it has to do with animals.

This is supposed to be the Word of God, and all we get is a page full of a weird and random names? I mean seriously, Zerubbabel is the father of Abihud, who is the father of Eliakim, who is the father of Azor? Who are these people? Oh, wait, that last guy had some islands named after him, right? Did he discover the Azores or something? No, he had nothing to do with the Azores and as far as we know he didn't discover or invent anything. Why should I care about who the fathers of these people are? This doesn't make for very inspiring reading. It seems to me that if God were going to speak to us and have what he says recorded, he would say something little more meaningful than a list of names of obscure people.

One problem we share with all other humans is we are prone to cultural myopia and arrogance. It doesn't often occur to us that just because something feels irrelevant and meaningless to us that it may not be irrelevant and meaningless to all people. We don't realize that something like this might have significance in other cultures. The fact is, genealogies like this one were huge to first century people, especially Jews.

One interesting feature of the New Testament is that it has 4 different biographies of Jesus. We know them as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Why is that? Was God repeating himself? Or did God commission 4 writers for this project intending to choose the best one, but then couldn't decide so he just kept them all? No, each of these writers aimed at a slightly different audience and had a different emphasis in mind. God cared about all those audiences, including us, so we have those 4 accounts of events. Matthew aimed his account of the life of Jesus specifically at first century Jewish people. It was not intended exclusively for them, so we can benefit from reading it, but you can see throughout the book touches that were clearly intended for those ancient Jewish folk.

This genealogy is a case in point. We think that it is strange to start a biography of a person the author considers the most important person to ever live, with a long list of mostly anonymous ancestors. But to Matthew's audience it wasn't strange at all. It was what they looked for.

We in America consider ourselves a meritocracy. We think a person's place should be determined by their own individual merit. One aspect of the genius of this country is we try not to judge people by what family they come from or who their parents are. It only matters what a person can do, so anyone, even a person from the lowest, poorest, least influential family has the opportunity to rise to the top. One result of this, however, is that we don't pay attention to lineage. I suspect that many of you are like me. I can name my parents and grandparents, but that's as far

as it goes. Until this week I didn't know the names of any of my great grandparents. I looked them up. One of them was a woman with the unusual name Autensie Whited. Go back one more generation and I found a woman named Tump Yates. More disturbing, I saw that in January of 1856 a man named Marion Myatt married a woman whose maiden name was Edith Myatt. Do you find anything about that to be unsettling?

The first century Jews were different from us. Lineage mattered a lot to them. They considered it an integral and important part of one's identity. You see often in the Old Testament that people had one name and were identified by that name plus who they were the "son of." Who you were the child of was an essential part of who you are. That's actually closer to reality than we like to think most of the time. Who our parents are has enormous impact on who we are. And we all have a sense that our roots are important to our identity. You see those commercials on television where people talk about how they went on Ancestry.com and had their DNA tested to discover where they came from and are surprised to learn they aren't German after all, but Scottish.

So Matthew wanted to introduce his readers to this Jesus as the divider of history, the most important person to ever walk this earth, and the first thing he had to do was explain where he came from. It was a crucial part of his identity in their eyes.

There is another aspect to the significance of this genealogy. When our kids were in high school they both participated in classic high school musicals. Toby's junior year they performed *The Music Man*, in which the lead role is that of Harold Hill. Hill was, of course, a con man posing as a professor of music who came to the small Iowa town of River City to start a town marching band. He claimed to have graduated from the Gary Conservatory of Music in "aught 5." Of course some in town, especially Marion, the librarian and piano teacher, were suspicious, so at the urging of the mayor the school board at one point stops "Professor" Hill and says, "Just a minute, Professor. We need your credentials."

Sitting in a doctor's office waiting to be treated I notice the framed documents on the wall telling me where this physician received medical training. If I saw this person graduated from, say, Stanford's medical school and then did a residency at UCLA, I'd be impressed. Those are worthy credentials. This doctor is legit.

That's part of what Matthew is doing in these verses. He begins his account saying, "this is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew claims Jesus is the long prophesied Messiah, the Anointed One of God,

the rightful heir to the throne of David, the king of the Jews, who would rein over a kingdom that would never end. When Matthew made that claim the reaction would immediately be, “Just a minute, Tax Collector, we need his credentials.” That’s precisely what Matthew provides. It starts with his genealogy. Everyone knew that Messiah first had to be Jewish, then had to be a descendant of David, to whom it was promised that his descendant would rule on the throne of Israel forever. If either one of those was not true then the whole Messiah Project was a non-starter. It was DOA from day one.

So Matthew traced Jesus’ ancestry back to David then all the way to Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people. There’s an easy to miss semi-hidden fact about this genealogy that Matthew’s audience would have noticed. It was common back then to have genealogies that were edited for ease of memory. In other words, some generations might be skipped, so the line would be there but there would be a few less names to remember. So I might be Rick, the son of Cecil, referring to not my father, but my grandfather. Matthew does that.

He broke up Jesus’ genealogy into 3 chunks. The first goes from Abraham to David, the second from David until Israel went into exile in Babylon, and the third from the exile to when Jesus showed up. Verse 17 tells each of those blocks contains 14 names, so that makes them easier to remember. Why 14? I’m glad you asked. The ancient Hebrews assigned number values to letters. So aleph, the first letter in the alphabet was 1, beth, the second letter was 2, gimel, the third letter was 3 and so on. In Hebrew David’s name was spelled daleth, waw, daleth (DWD), using the 4th letter, the 6th then the 4th again. When you add up the numbers in David’s name the value comes to...wait for it...14. The whole thing is designed to say to Jews, Jesus is the long hoped for son of David.

WHAT A BUNCH OF WOMEN!

Now if I were trying to promote some candidate for Messiah, I would want to make him look as good as I possibly could. So if I’m going to present his credentials they are going to be as sanitized as possible. In other words, I’m going to make his genealogy be sparkling.

If I wanted to convince you of my qualifications I wouldn’t present a framed report card showing that I got a C in Art at Compton Junior High School or one showing that I almost failed a theoretical math class called Abstract Algebra in college. I wouldn’t show you a ticket I received for speeding on San Elijo Drive. Those things would impress no one. I would try to present credentials that spoke to my sterling qualities.

That is not what we see in this passage. This genealogy contains some real skunks. There was Jacob, a schemer and con man. There was Judah, who cheated an innocent young woman who was his daughter in law, sold one of his own brothers as a slave and liked to visit prostitutes. There was Rehoboam, who was such a conceited jerk as a king that he caused a civil war and blew up the nation of Israel. He was the anti-Abe Lincoln. Then there was Manasseh, who may well have been the worst person ever to rule on the throne of Judah. 1 Kings 21:11 says he did more evil than even the Amorites, some pagan enemies of Israel, and verse 16 says he “shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end.” He was just awful.

But the most startling thing about this genealogy is the women mentioned in it. Let me remind you that in that ancient male dominated culture it was highly unusual for women to even be alluded to in a genealogy, and this short one mentions 5. And what a group! First, verse 3 mentions Tamar. Her story is one they don’t tell a lot in Sunday School because it would surely lead to some awkward conversations and some unhappy parents.

Tamar, who quite likely was a Canaanite, a Gentile, married one of the sons of Judah, a guy named Er. But Er was a skuzzbucket. Genesis 38:7 says he was wicked in the Lord’s sight. And he died, leaving Tamar a childless widow. In that day that meant she was destitute. Land was the source of income. She needed a son to get a part of the family land. Without land there was no way to support oneself. So the rule was to help a widow, a woman in Tamar’s position, she was to sleep with her late husband’s brother in hopes of becoming pregnant and having a son. That son would be viewed as her late husband’s heir, thus property could be assigned to him. Tamar did that with Judah’s second son, her husband’s brother, but he was no better than Er, and she ended up being widow 2.0. There was yet one more boy in Judah’s family, but he was pretty young, so Judah told Tamar to wait until he got a little older.

She did that faithfully, but it became apparent that Judah wasn’t ever going to let her have anything to do with boy number 3. Judah had connected the dots. Let’s see, every son I have who marries Tamar ends up dead. I’m 2 for 2 so far. No way we’re taking the chance that she might go 3 for 3.

Tamar figured out what was happening, so she hatched a plot to get a son and a piece of the family estate. It turns out that Judah had to go to Las Vegas on a business trip. Tamar knew where he was going, so she went to Vegas and

disguised herself as a hooker. It tells you everything you need to know about Judah that she could count on him to look for a hooker while he was in Vegas.

Sure enough, Judah, did not see through her disguise, thus did not recognize her. All he saw was a hot body for sale, so he picked her up. Tamar got what she felt she needed. She ended up pregnant. Later when he learned she was pregnant Judah was hypocritically indignant because obviously she had been sleeping around. He planned to have her executed for her crime of promiscuity. Somehow he seemed not to notice how inconsistent his indignation was given his own behavior. Then she proved who she had slept with. Turns out what happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas after all! Tamar gave birth to twin boys she named Perez and Zerah.

So there's Tamar, an ancestor of Messiah. A woman who tricked her less than noble father-in-law into sleeping with her and getting her pregnant. She had two children by her father-in-law. Like I said, this story is not rated SS – suitable for Sunday School. Isn't it interesting that Matthew went out of his way to identify Tamar. He didn't have to do that. He could have just said in verse 3, "Judah, the father of Perez and Zerah, Perez the father of Hezron." That would have been the norm. He specifically mentioned Tamar when it was totally unnecessary to do so.

The trend continues in verse 5. That verse takes us back to Joshua 2. Israel finally was about to enter the promised land. The fortress city of Jericho stood in the way. The Israelis sent a couple of Mossad agents into the city to gather intelligence, but they had no place to stay since this was before the Holiday Inn Express came to Jericho. They found lodgings in a house of a woman named Rahab. This woman, unlike Tamar, wasn't pretending to be a prostitute. She was the real thing. Of course the Israeli spies would think the best place to stay is with a prostitute. At this point this kind of thing is looking like a trend with Israeli men. Though they were hiding out, the spies' cover was blown. However, Rahab hid them and lied about them, claiming they had been there but had left town in a hurry. For taking care of them the spies promised her that she would be safe when the Israelis invaded. They kept their promise. And later Salmon, who was the son of the leader of the tribe of Judah, married her. It must have been interesting when Salmon brought Rahab home to meet mom and dad telling them they were engaged. Great. Isn't that just what a Jewish mother hoped for her son, that he would marry a Canaanite prostitute? It turns out that Salmon and Rahab, the ex-prostitute, were ancestors of Boaz, making them ancestors of David and Jesus Messiah.

Speaking of Boaz, he married the famous widow, Ruth. At last, a woman who was neither a prostitute nor who pretended to be one. The only black mark against Ruth

was that she was from Moab, a pagan foe of Israel. Uh, is that bad? Deuteronomy 23:3 says, “No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation.” In other words, never! But Ruth, the Moabite, not only was allowed into the assembly, she became an ancestor of its Messiah. This meant that Messiah himself was part Moabite!

Then verse 6 mentions that David was the father of Solomon, “whose mother had been Uriah’s wife.” Yeah, she’d been Uriah’s wife right up until she committed adultery with David and then David plotted to have Uriah killed so he could marry her. Great, add the infamous Bathsheba to the list of women Matthew went out of his way to bring up as being part of the line of Jesus Christ.

The only woman mentioned in this list who doesn’t have something rather unsavory about her is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Although of course there were those rumors about her you know. I mean, come on, angels, the Spirit of God, a virgin birth? Yeah right. Who could believe that story?

IMPLICATIONS

This is actually astounding. In this genealogy there is no mention of great and godly women like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah or any of the wives of Ram, Uzziah, Josiah, Zerubbabel, who for all we know might have been wonderful godly women. We’ll never know about them. The women singled out are hardly people a PR agent would choose to spotlight as messianic ancestors. This was an obvious, deliberate and shocking action by Matthew. What can we take from it?

THE ACCOUNT IS TRUSTWORTHY

In Matthew’s culture if you are trying to convince people that you are telling the truth the last thing you would do is highlight women in your genealogy. And you absolutely would not highlight these particular women. This fact should make us confident that Matthew is not trying to whitewash anything. He is giving us the unvarnished truth, so we can trust what he tells us. There really was no other reason for including the names of the women that he has in this genealogy.

GOD VALUES WOMEN

A second thing we can take away from this is that women’s lives matter. In our culture today there seems to be an emphasis on the idea that women’s lives are all that matters and men are scum. Some of the men in Matthew’s genealogy were definitely scum. But in that culture the sad truth is that women’s lives didn’t matter. They were not valued, so much so that they were treated like property.

Bringing up the women as Matthew did was remarkable, and it said that they played a significant role in God's plan to rescue the human race through the Messiah. That might not meet the standard of feminists in our culture today, but it was a radical step back in the first century. Luke also has a genealogy of Jesus, and he does not mention any women in it. But if you read Luke's account of Jesus' life you will discover that he highlights several women in the story. He has the same message Matthew does, he just presents it in a different way.

This is affirmation, of course, to women, that they matter to God. And it is a reminder that while women have been oppressed throughout history pretty much everywhere in the world, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the lever that should elevate the status of women. Galatians 3:26-28 says, "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Each one of us is created in the image of God, and of incalculable value to him. In Christ men and women matter equally. Each individual, whether man or woman, child or adult, Jew or Gentile, black or white, rich or poor, is loved and valued by God. This truth is the ultimate foundation for a society where all people are valued, where the dignity of every human being is respected, where all people truly are created equal.

GOD LOVES AND USES FLAWED PEOPLE

Think about Tamar and her unsavory plan to get a son. She cooked up that scheme out of desperation. She could see nowhere else to turn. But you can be sure she wasn't proud of what she'd done. Can you imagine the conversation when people asked about the father of her twins? How did she explain that to her boys as they were growing up? She did what she felt she had to do to survive. It's safe to say she did not likely think that her less than godly action would be included in God's plan to rescue the human race. She would never have imagined that she and one of her sons would become a part of the line of the Messiah, the Son of God. But God used her and even her desperate actions, though far from in accord with his will, and made something wonderful happen.

Rahab had a lot of baggage she would have liked to dump as well. Do you think she could ever have dreamed that the Almighty, Holy God, could use her, as compromised as it is possible to be, to bring about his plan? I doubt it, but God did it. Do you think that was an accident? Why would God include such flawed people in his plan? I think it's pretty safe to say it's a reminder that in this world, badly

flawed people are the only ones who are available. It's a reminder that while we might think on the human scale that some are better than others, when the scale is divine there is not all that much difference between us and we are all equally and desperately in need of grace and forgiveness from God.

In his cowardice Abraham lied about his wife and caused terrible pain and compromise for her. Isaac did the same thing. Jacob was a con man. David committed adultery and murdered a man to cover it up. Peter denied Jesus at the crucial moment, and Paul said he was the chief of sinners. God seems to have a thing for people with stains on their souls.

This should have significant impact on both how we see ourselves and how we view other people. There are people in this world who apparently think they are really righteous and that God is sort of lucky to have them. Those people need to pay attention to the verses in the Bible that say God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. But there are many more people who carry around a burden of guilt, a sense of inadequacy, of not measuring up, of feeling like God is probably really down on them. I know that because I feel that most of the time. I wish I was more and better than I am. I'm so far from what I think I should be and God wants me to be. Do you feel that?

I suspect Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba all felt shame and felt that burden of failing to measure up. Even Ruth knew she was not worthy to be included by God because of her ethnic deficit. And yet God used all of them. Do you think it possible that God might also be able to love and use you and me? Jesus came to bring rest for your soul. He came to give us grace and peace, not condemnation. So what this remarkable genealogy should do for us is remind us that while we are flawed and often failing, God still loves us in Christ and wants to use us, weak as we may be.

This also speaks to how we see others. How do you think Tamar would be received by Christians today if they knew about the stunt that she had pulled? How do you think Rahab the prostitute would be viewed by Christians? How about the adulteress, Bathsheba?

A couple of months back Laurie and I were on vacation, sitting on a beach on a gorgeous day, relaxing and reading. The beach was mostly uncrowded. We were sitting in a spot under a tree where we couldn't see who was up the beach from us because of some foliage that was next to us. At one point a man who apparently had been sitting a ways up the beach from us decided to go snorkeling and thought the best place to enter the water was in an area right out in front of us. Here's the

problem, the guy was wearing a thong swimsuit. That was just so wrong. It was the kind of thing I would have loved to go my entire life without ever seeing. I immediately wished I could unsee it. As soon as I stopped gagging I thought, “Dude, what is wrong with you? That is a sin against the human race.”

Honestly I had some much less than charitable thoughts about that guy. They came with no effort whatsoever. What I was thinking had nothing to do with grace and compassion. It was mostly just automatic revulsion. And I am supposed to be a person who is transformed by the grace of God so that I love all people all the time. What my reaction to that guy proved is that I am a flawed person. Here’s the good news, God loves and has used people who have done far worse than me. This genealogy shows that. So I can rejoice in God’s grace to me. But I am also reminded that God also loves our presumably European and tasteless friend on the beach. The examples of the women in Matthew’s list call on me to have a much more gracious view of flawed people. I still think what he was wearing is just wrong though.

GOD DOES AMAZING THINGS

Matthew introduced this section saying it was the genealogy of “Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” This was a project that was thousands of years in the making, going back to Abraham, and actually even before. God had given some promises of the coming of this Messiah and also given some specifics about his identity. In Jesus this plan was finally being fulfilled.

What amazes me is that the people mentioned in these verses mostly never knew what they were a part of. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, as well as Nahshon, Azor and all the rest did not know that they were playing an important role in bringing the Messiah into the world. In fact, those women would have been astounded had you told them. In the process some of the people in this list did some terrible things. Some of them, in fact, were pretty much awful people. Yet their disobedience to God, their lamentable or even terrible choices did not keep God from working his great plan and completing it. In the middle of that plan those people did not know fully what God was doing and didn’t understand their part in it. But that didn’t keep it from happening.

God does astounding things, many of which we can only stand in awe of. Have you heard of the bar tailed godwit. This is a bird that grows up in a number of places in the world, among them northern Alaska. They are land birds, but when they mature they migrate every year all the way to New Zealand. When they do so for the first time they seemingly have no way of knowing where they are going, yet unerringly

something guides them to New Zealand. They cannot land in water and rest on the surface, they can't fish, but they fly all that way over water. One was fitted with a transmitter, and it flew 7369 miles non stop in just over 8 days. No one knows how they do it or what guides them on their journey, but they find their way. God has his ways of accomplishing things that can astound us. We may not understand the plan, how it works or how it will all come out, but we can trust God's wise plan. This genealogy reminds us that even some of the worst things humans can do will not only not block the plan, they somehow will be woven into it.

Recently Jan Menconi shared with the women's Bible study a talk by John Piper in which he said that God could be doing 10,000 things in your life, but you might be only aware of 3 of them. In the middle of the battle we often don't see the big picture of what God is doing, but we can know that he is carrying the plan forward, and using us even in the midst of the messes we sometimes make in our lives.

God is working in our world, often at times in ways we don't see. But we need to remember that Ephesians 1:11 says God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." We also must remember Psalm 34:8 that says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him." We take refuge in God and his working in this world, because we know it is good.

We're not always going to be able to see his plan. At Thanksgiving I asked our family what had surprised them this year. Michael said what surprised him was that as he transitioned out of the Marines and they moved here and bought a house, everything went the way they needed it to. The Marines let him out as they wanted, the timing was right, he got the job he wanted with Delta Airlines, he started right when he wanted, he got assigned to the aircraft he wanted to fly, he got based in LA as he wanted, and they were able to buy the house they wanted. He was surprised by all of that because our experience of life is it never goes exactly the way we want. So often it is hard to see any hint of God's plan at work in life because it goes the opposite of what we want.

Years ago we were visiting our brother and friend Mike Riley when he was coaching at Oregon State. I had the experience of being down on the sidelines while the band was performing. On the field the whole thing looked like chaos. People were marching around to random places and it looked utterly confusing. From my perspective it seemed totally meaningless. But from up in the box the picture was completely different. People sitting up there could see it was not random at all. The band was forming pictures and spelling out words that made perfect sense. It was full of meaning. And that's how life is for us. It seems

random, confusing, but it is full of meaning as God works out his plan. So we don't have to wave our arms around wildly like we might while trying to make a faulty towel dispenser work in our efforts to make life work. We can trust that God is at work bringing about his plan, knowing that his plan is good and certain. In other words, we can cease striving and know that he is God.