

Proper 15

The Gospels include genealogies of Jesus of Nazareth.

In Luke, the descent of Jesus is traced all the way back to Adam.

In the Gospel of Matthew, from which we are reading this year, the writer is content to trace Jesus's heritage back a mere 42 generations, 14 from Jesus to the deportation of the Jews to Babylon 14 more from the deportation to the era of King David 14 more back to Abraham.

In those 42 generations are remembered three women, Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth, who were not Israelites, not Hebrews, not heirs to the covenant, in the first instance.

There is no attempt to hide this; it is a frank admission.

Jesus was a Jew with Gentile ancestors.

Jesus, confessed as Son of David and Messiah and hope of Israel, had human ancestors who worshiped idols and were unclean in the eyes of Israel.

Care must be taken when we speak about the people Israel in the life of the church.

This week reminds us why.

We must remember that Christian people used to leave Good Friday services and burn Jewish homes and kill Jewish people.

Priests incited them from the pulpit to do it.

We cannot forget that within the Christian heartland of Europe arose a deeply unchristian ideology that led to the murder of 6 million Jews.

And we must remember the teaching of our most authoritative theologian, St. Paul, who insisted that the promises of God to the Hebrew people were irrevocable; that they are a people chosen by God forever.

Every meaningful thing that you and I know about God, we learned from the Jews.

Our debt to them is incalculable and must always be remembered and remembered in love.

So Jesus, heir to all those promises, met this Canaanite woman, in deep distress about her daughter's possession.

And he, and his disciples, were inclined to ignore her distress.

He had some clarity of purpose, that his mission was to the Jews, not to Gentiles like her.

She was a daughter, ethnically at least, of Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth, and he was too.

She wore the markers of her Canaanite heritage; his were hidden by his more privileged Jewish heritage.

Perhaps his mother and father didn't tell him much about his Canaanite ancestors; maybe they'd forgotten,

as my wife's grandfather and his siblings never spoke of the fact that their mother was a Jew, which was an inconvenient truth in rural Georgia.

Jesus and the men around him did know or didn't acknowledge her pain and their affinity, their connection to her.

But she persisted, didn't she?

She kept talking, imploring, asking him to see things from her perspective.

She even turned his dog analogy around,

asking him to see the world from the place on the floor that history had left her.

Just a crumb, Jesus, she said, that might be enough.

Get down here on the floor with me.

And he recognized her faith, and her daughter was healed.

Did the spirit of Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth become activated within him?

Did God open up a fuller sense of the universality of his mission,
of his redemptive purpose, in this interaction?

I don't know, but it may be that you and I, Gentile sinners, for the most part,

owe this persistent Gentile woman some debt,

for advocating for our place in the ministry of Jesus.

Remember this interaction the next time someone makes you uncomfortable in their complaint,
in their advocacy.

Turning away too soon from the discomfort others cause us can blind us to the truth.

The lesson from Isaiah and many other points in the Scriptures point to the wideness of God's
mercy of which we sang earlier today.

Isaiah, speaking from deep within Israel's history, says that God's will and revelation was not just
for Israel,

that through them God would claim strangers and foreigners for himself,
everyone who would acknowledge God and the covenant could come in.

Women like Ruth, who married a Hebrew man who died young and who pledged to live with and
care for her Hebrew mother-in-law in those memorable words sometimes read at weddings:

"Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your
God my God."

Ruth, and her descendent in the story with Jesus, are illustrations of Isaiah's word
that God's "house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples...[that the God] who gathers
the outcasts of Israel...will gather others to them" from among the nations.

In the mysterious providence of God, we too have been called together and given to each other.

All you liberals from Lander who have come from all over the country.

All you conservatives with deep roots in Greenwood County and the rural South.

Here we are together, members of the Body of Christ and this particular church.

Down the street at this very hour worship black Christians who are members of the same body
and who have much to teach white Christians about persistence,

about claiming the attention of Jesus through weary years of violence and oppression.

Like the Canaanites and Jews, whites and blacks in America appear as two peoples in many ways
and yet have never been as separate as official accounts would suggest.

Tomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings; Strom Thurmond and Carrie Butler;

the lines between us have often blurred, even by men who like Jefferson and Thurmond

who insisted on the supremacy of white people and the necessity of our separation from each other. Jesus' ministry was fuller and richer when he conformed his work to his complex heritage and the universal, reconciling will of God.

The life our nation and, more importantly, the work of the church, will be so much more full and rich and blessed, when we fully claim the good news that the death of Jesus Christ has made of one blood all the people of the earth.

Every moment and movement in history stands under judgment in light of the Cross. We celebrate all that testifies to the good news of our reconciliation to God and one another through Jesus.

We mourn and seek to redress all that does not speak to God's reconciliation given through Christ and the universality of God's love and will to abundant life.

In January of 1737, the Charleston newspaper reported "a melancholy incident," in which the son of a planter was sent down the Ashley River, in a canoe certainly dug out by slaves in the African style, to go to school in Charleston.

He was accompanied by one of the family's slaves, but they never arrived. Some weeks later they were found, the newspaper reported, "sticking in the mud in the said river, their arms clasping each other."¹

We are going to be together; dead in the mud or alive in the Spirit. Let us live, by daily action, by careful listening, by earnest repentance, and by prayer, toward the new creation that is meant for us.

¹ See Peter A. Coclanis, *The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death in the South Carolina Low Country*, p. 111.