

LESSONS IN THE BEGINNING
GREATER THAN GOOD

Texts on Sunday, August 14, 2011

Genesis 38; Mark 10: 17-22

“Write down your three earliest memories,” the psychologist said. My seminary training was underway and the denomination’s ordination committee had sent me, like every candidate for the ministry, to a career evaluation center. They were administering batteries of personality and preference tests, but now—my earliest memories? I said, “I’m sure I’ve forgotten most of the important things that happened.”

“Of course most memories have vanished,” he replied. “But it doesn’t matter. What sticks sticks for a reason. The memories you still carry relate to the way you made sense of the struggles and yearnings of your early life—and those key issues are still keys to hidden doors as we negotiate adulthood.” Now, he probably said all this *after* I had fulfilled his request—but this is how I remember the story. So I pondered and sifted and organized wisps of memories until I had the three that seemed earliest.

Through this process, I caught an insight into how the Bible came to be. No one can be sure what really happened long ago, or how the stories were sifted like flour and kneaded like dough, then left to rise, then punched down again and again. But here is a fact. A few stories got baked; a few took a certain shape. Why? I would say, *not* because they happened as told, but because they helped as told. Like an individual’s remnant memories, these stories offered lessons in the beginning for how a tribe survives and thrives, in spite of hatred, violence, famine, and sloth. These lessons have been tried and applied in a thousand thousand communities. They work.

Consider our story. You might train your ears to prick up like a collie’s whenever you hear the name of Judah. Of the twelve tribes of ancient Israel, Judah’s borders comprised the largest territory by far. King David was born in Judah. He built Jerusalem in Judah. After invaders wiped all the other tribes into oblivion 2700 years ago, only the tribe of Judah remained to worship the Lord God and hold these ancient scriptures holy. Why, the word “Judaism” comes from the “Judah.” So does “Judea,” as in

a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled . . . and Joseph went from the city of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem.

So when you hear the name of Judah, ready your heart to hear this tribe telling its children how they came to be, and what their nature is. Then see if in what they say you see yourselves also.

Whether in fact or only in legend, it matters not: From the point of view

of those who chose these stories, on Judah of Genesis, the future of all God's promises now hangs. To fulfill his role, Judah does not need to become a great warrior or a king. He need not dive as deep as his dad did in things divine. He has one job: to make children and raise them up to make more. At this one job, the story says, Judah was a failure. Yes, he fathered three sons; his equipment was not the problem. But something of the father's carelessness for the future of his family is sown like bad seed in the sons, and two of them die. With only one son left, you would think Judah's senses and seriousness might run on red alert. Instead, he sends his only daughter-in-law back to her father with a vague promise to give her his youngest son when the boy comes of age. The future of the nation hangs in doubt while Tamar waits out widowhood. Judah's wife dies. He mourns for a time, then goes on with his business. From now on, if a female offers, he'll buy sex, but he has severed himself from the great purpose to which he is called—to create and nourish the people of the promise.

No nation in history ever inscribed its central traditions with such severe self-criticism as Israel's. Here, astonishingly, the people remember that it lies in their Judah-nature to care not at all for their own future. This too is a lesson in the beginning for all communities of faith: a sound confession of sin can mend the cracks in the foundation on which the house must be rebuilt.

Can we see in Judah our own nature? To do so, we must leap deeper into the meaning of the generations, for the issue is not *issue* in the flesh. No, as we said here in the first month of my ministry with you, the issue is a lack of concern for *spiritual generation*. Here's the hypothesis in stark self-criticism. When adults younger than forty or so do not appear substantially in the membership and leadership of a church or a tradition, the cause is not that they have gone astray. The cause is that the elders had nothing compelling to say to their children about their experience of faith in God through Christ. If the elders liked the sauna of their Sunday traditions well enough, it seems the steam must have kept them from seeing who is not here. When children's voices no more sound in the sanctuary, and this seems meet and right to them—just as it did to Judah, who was happier off shearing sheep—then the *eros* of faith and life has gone from a people. Over the last many decades, something like this happened throughout the liberal mainline churches. You could say we lost our tradition, for “tradition” means “what is handed over” to the generations.

Is there something to do? Yes! Tamar! Sheathed head to foot in widow's clothes, hidden and childless in her father's house, apparently powerless to shape her future, young Tamar dutifully awaits a good or a bad fate from the hand of Judah. Will he rise to his destiny, to grow the tribe? Or must she face a long life draped in black, taking stares of pity from the townspeople?

What would you do? No—what *will* you do? For though we know we are like Judah—too careless of the future—we are also like Tamar. Have you not sometimes felt like her in a church meeting, or in a worship service, or as a citizen of this muscle-bound nation, where the rules and regulations and politics bind you like Tamar's heavy widow's garments; where your own energies go suppressed or repressed or unexpressed—good and wise, lively and fruitful though they be—because the rules say not here, not now, no way?

Suddenly, Tamar will stand for this no more! Suddenly, she will not pass another day bound up in a good tradition which keeps her from becoming great with child. She is like some men in prison I have known, who on one certain day, having worn long, hot sentences in the house for too many years, finally get up and decide to grow great. Tamar stands for that spiritual intelligence inside you by the very grace of God which will not anymore shuffle about the church's chores, if the future is not in them. Before she leaves her father's house, Tamar is already expecting—something greater than good.

Judah and Tamar—we have each of them in ourselves. Now they meet in the open road. He thinks she is a prostitute, and he wants her. Or rather, he wants himself; that is, he wants to feel his vitality, but he wants no consequences from the experience. He has severed himself from his future, and he is willing to pay for the privilege of having go-nowhere sex. He offers a goat. In Genesis, a goat symbolizes ordinary religious ritual—the formal ways we invent to manage our relationship with God on our terms, putting little of ourselves at risk. But Tamar, who stands for the spiritual desire to grow great, refuses the ordinary, easy sacrifice. She demands instead his signet, his cord, and his staff. She demands symbols of his whole person. The signet is his identity. The staff is his power, his reputation, his authority. The cord, which binds garments over the body's softness, is his self-defense, the closure against self-disclosure. All these Tamar demands that he release to her—if he would have his way with her.

But only Tamar is a true agent in this great drama. Judah merely acts on his fears and desires, like any creature. Only Tamar intends the future of all Judah—and she is a Canaanite. Such a story! It is as if the tellers of this tale are shouting to the generations: *We need help from beyond ourselves to become ourselves!* Insofar as we are children of Judah, conservative of tradition, we will die unless at urgent moments of God-sent crisis, we let go of our identity, let go of our power and authority, let go of our cautious self-protection and co-operate with the vital energies God is sending us from outside ourselves to make us great. And insofar as we are children of Tamar, liberal of soul, we can only bring the new into being by intending it, acting on it, and putting our own limited goods at risk, body and soul, for the sake of something greater than we can see. The risk must be taken.

If you had just read the gospels for the first time and stepped into a church, you could be excused for assuming that the churches of Jesus Christ must live always ready to risk their life for the sake of God's justice, God's kingdom, for this above all is our Lord's teaching. "Good Teacher," asks a man of Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus replies. Beware the game of good, he seems to say. "Watch out when all speak well of you," he warns. Now, we don't need to make Tamar's tactic into a law to take the lesson: If you are bound to be good, you are not free to become great. Jesus' inquirer was bound to be good. He had kept all the laws since youth, yet still he was in despair of life. "Sell what you own," Jesus counsels him, "and you will have treasure in heaven. Then follow me." That is what Tamar did. In uttermost love for the people she had adopted in marriage, she sold all the goods she owned for a greater treasure.

Now comes the news to Judah, the avatar of conservative values: Tamar is growing great with child, they say. Burn her, he says. Left to itself, the conservative worldview will use any authority, force, or terror to keep the world from changing. We are so like him, willing to set a torch to any signs of growth we do not understand. Judah stands for that kind of religious certainty which burns strangers out of the fellowship, ignores the wisdom of other cultures, and dumps fire on distant people to distract itself from the crisis of its own making—where, left to itself, there will be no great future.

But at the fire pit, Tamar—who stands for the future, for love, for growth and wisdom—asks Judah to see himself honestly. "Take note whose these are, the signet, staff, and cord. By him whose these are am I with child." At last Judah sees that by the grace of God, he has not been left to himself, but is deeply involved in the great things now growing. Yet to become great, he must give up something good. What will he do? Since Tamar's package has come to him privately, he could retake his identity, his reputation, and his defenses, if she is burned. Or he can grow to be great, if he will let go of his old story, his old reputation, his old ways. Choose, Judah!

You know his answer: "She is more righteous than I." What she has done is greater than good, and great growth will follow. This too is Judah-nature, and a lesson in the beginning: At the right time, with the help of others, a people can start over in honesty and fruitfulness, no matter how willful or heedless or cruel they have been. All you have to do is sell what you have, and come and follow me, says Jesus. Whoever does this generates a story of faith so compelling and real, the generations never forget. This is how we will grow—greater than good.