

1 Christmas is one of those times we hang out with relatives we haven't seen or talked to for at least a year. Some of those relatives are easy to love and appreciate, while others of them are almost strangers who say and do absurd or embarrassing things that make us laugh, roll our eyes, or even gasp in disbelief. I had one relative who was a hoarder, and upon her death her niece discovered stacks of used butter wrappers that she had been saving for no apparent reason. I had a great uncle who had untreated skin cancer on his ear, and each year at Christmas we'd see more and more of his ear disappearing under the ugly purple and red mass of cancer cells that was consuming his flesh. Still another relative was living with another woman all her life, and it was only after her death that the family openly acknowledged that they were most likely lovers. It's funny how our sense of what constitutes scandal changes over the years. At least one uncle was a chronic alcoholic, a regular part of Christmas gatherings until liver disease finally claimed his life. Another uncle lived with untreated Bipolar Disorder. I'll bet you could make a list like this as well, especially if you included in-laws and ex-spouses!

As I considered all my relatives, I realized that I'm probably on some of their lists as well! There are plenty of absurd and embarrassing things I've done over the years that must have made my relatives wonder how I wound up in the same family tree with them! But I also realized that remembering each of them brings me a kind of joy that I didn't fully appreciate when I was younger. Each one is a part of who I am through our shared experiences, even if it was only once a year. Each one of them was kind to me in the ways they knew how to be. Each one of them, in their own way, was showing me what Jesus looked like. I don't know that I'd want any of them living in my basement, but I am glad to have had such a richly diverse tapestry of relatives.

2 Jesus also had some pretty surprising relatives, characters in his family tree that still make us raise our eyebrows. The Scriptures are amazingly honest about their human shortcomings. At the same time, there's something redeeming about their faith that trumps their human foibles, and it seems to me that it's because of their imperfect humanity, not in spite of it, that God chose them to be included in Christ's family. If God can see redemptive

power in his motley crew of relatives, surely God can find the same in yours. Let's take a look at the first portion of the genealogy of Jesus in the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. {Read Matthew 1:1-6a, NIV}

3 You might remember that Abraham and Sarah were the ones God sent on a journey with the promise that they would be blessed to become a blessing to all people. You might also remember that God's promise to Abraham was and is being fulfilled through Jesus, a descendant of Abraham. What you might not remember are the stumbles that Abraham and Sarah took along the way. At ninety years old, Sarah doubted God's promise that she would bear a child. Abraham had his own trust issues with God. On two separate occasions he let soldiers carry Sarah off after lying to them about her married status for fear that they would kill him if they knew. And yet both Sarah and Abraham were extraordinarily faithful and risk-taking for God, setting out on a trek to a new home with only God's word that they would be blessed. It was their faith that qualified them to be the forebearers of Jesus. Each of them, in their unique ways, offer us a small glimpse of what God looks like.

4 And then there was Tamar. Tamar is the first woman named in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, the first in a series of unlikely heroines to appear. The fact that these are woman makes them notable enough in an ancient Jewish genealogy. But most of them didn't come from Jewish families either- that is, they were probably gentiles. On top of that, most of them were involved in some type of sex scandal, although not in the ways you might expect.

Tamar was a Canaanite who married into the family of Judah. When Tamar's husband died without producing a child, Jewish law required that the next brother marry her. After he died as well, Tamar's father-in-law blamed Tamar for their deaths and unjustly decided to keep her away from his third and only remaining son. Tamar was a widow, and without a husband or a son she was completely cut off from an economic future in a land and culture completely dominated by men. So Tamar decided to take things into her own hands by disguising herself as a temple prostitute and lying in wait on the side of the road for her father-in-law, who ultimately got her pregnant with the male heir she so desperately needed.

Quite a story, isn't it? Matthew's genealogy connects Jesus to sinful people whose sins were redeemed by God through determined outsiders. Tamar, too, gives us a glimpse of the face of God.

5 Let's continue now with our reading from Matthew 1. **{Read Matthew 1:6b-11, NIV}**. Everyone remembers David, the brave young lad who defended God's honor by facing a giant with a sling shot and went on to unify the 12 tribes into a one kingdom. But do you also remember his scandalous abuse of power, when instead of leading his troops into battle he stayed home at his palace, forced himself on a young woman bathing in a courtyard, and then had her husband murdered so that he could claim her as his wife? That woman, Bathsheba, is obliquely referenced in the genealogy as "Uriah's wife," a pointed reminder that David had her husband, Uriah, killed. In David we find yet another flawed human being who made selfish, wrong decisions that brought pain to himself, others, and his relationship with God. And yet, we also see an example of redemption, an example of how one can turn away from sin and return to God- not to escape all the consequences, but to at least return to the path of life. God is the King of redemption, and instead of killing David or separating him from Bathsheba, he redeemed their illicit relationship to produce an heir who would become the next king and forebearer of Jesus, Solomon. Solomon, incidentally, also became caught up in sex scandals, this time involving the worship of foreign gods.

5 There are so many other examples of God's redemption of the questionable relatives of Jesus: Rahab, the foreign prostitute who had enough faith in God to help the spies hide in Jericho; Ruth, the foreign widow who became Christ's forebearer because of her faith and faithfulness in accompanying her mother-in-law Naomi back to Bethlehem; and of course Mary, an unmarried, pregnant teen who gracefully and obediently accepted an unexplainable pregnancy and the radical intervention by God into her daily life and future.

Who are the surprising relatives in your life? Is it possible that it's not the outrageous and embarrassing things they do that God means you to notice? God always works through imperfect people to give us glimpses of the divine. Your challenge is to look for signs of God bringing redemption in and through your relatives.

The privilege of witnessing God's work in this world is always an occasion for joy. Jesus came into this world so that ordinary, imperfect people like us might join in the mission of loving God and loving others. It may be that even our crazy, butter-wrapper hoarding relatives could inspire us on our journey by revealing the joy of Jesus in surprising ways.



Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com