

Wednesday, December 20, 2017 – Advent Midweek III
“A list!”

Matthew 1: 1-17

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Adapted from CSL Series “Family Life”
Text/Application

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Our text is a list from Matthew 1:1–17—Christ’s family tree. Now, preaching from a list can be sermonic suicide, a certain sleeper. Seminary professors tell students, “Avoid lists. Shun lists. Whatever you do, never, ever preach on lists!”

But today, foregoing all conventional sermonic wisdom, our text is a list. I know. I know. Matthew 1:1–17 reads much like a telephone book. A telephone book? People of a certain age have no idea what I’m talking about. Back in the dark ages, in BC times—BC stands for “Before Computer”—you’d actually have to look up someone’s phone number in a book! And that’s what Matthew 1:1–17 looks like, a big, fat, dull, dry telephone book!

“It’s true,” you lament, “This is going to be sermonic suicide, a certain sleeper! Wake me up when it’s over! Why in the world would pastor choose to preach on a list?” I’ll tell you why. Matthew’s list tells us something very important about family life.

“Family Life.” That’s the name of our Advent sermon series. We’ve been in Luke’s Gospel, learning about Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist. Today’s family truth comes from Matthew’s Gospel. And it is this. Lower your expectations. That’s it. Pretty simple, isn’t it? That’s the goal. Lower your family expectations. Don’t get me wrong. You have cute children. Your husband can leap tall buildings in a single bound. Your wife is an amazing cook. Your teenagers are polite, good athletes, and solid citizens. But when it comes to family life it’s time, it’s high time, it’s past time, to what? Lower your expectations.

What do I mean? All too often, we expect children, spouses, in-laws, cousins, aunts, and uncles—to be perfect. And when they don’t measure up to our standards, we let them have it. “After what you just did, I can’t believe you’re my son!” “You’ll never get it right! Will you?” “Do I have to show you everything?” And then the final nail in the coffin, “You’re not the person I thought I married!” In the midst of all this trauma and turmoil Matthew’s genealogy says, “Lower your family expectations.” How does Matthew do it? He does it with a list! Let’s look at this list of Christ’s family members.

Tamar dressed like a woman of the night. Tamar is first mentioned in Genesis 38:6: “Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.” Er died, so Judah then gives Tamar to another son named Onan. Onan died, so upon the birth of another son, Shelah, Judah instructs Tamar to wait until Shelah grows up. At that time Shelah will become her husband. Are you kidding me? Judah is asking Tamar to wait at least twenty more years to get married!

This leads to one of the shortest business transactions in the Bible. Tamar dresses up like a woman of the night. Not knowing she is Tamar, Judah propositions her. Tamar asks for payment. Judah promises a young goat. They sleep together. Tamar conceives. They both go their own way. And this Tamar is in Christ’s family!

Tamar dressed like a woman of the night, that’s bad enough. But hold on to your hat, because Rahab (also in Christ’s family) was a Canaanite and a woman of the night (Jo 2:1). A woman of the night and a dreaded Canaanite. How shocking! And we all know from the popular VBS children’s song, “I Just Wanna Be a Sheep” that Canaanites do what? They raise Cain, at night!

It was bad enough that Canaanites worshiped the detestable gods called Baal and Asherah, but Moabites paid homage to a violent god named Chemosh who demanded child sacrifice. And, horror of horrors, Matthew includes another person on his list, Ruth—and Ruth was a Moabite. That’s a title she receives six times in the book of Ruth! Ruth once worshiped Chemosh!

Next in line comes Bathsheba who was an adulterous. This is so unsettling that Matthew can’t even bring himself to write her name “Bathsheba.” In Matthew 1:6 he simply calls her “the wife of Uriah.” You know the story. It was springtime and King David, instead of going off to war, takes a walk on the palace roof. He sees a beautiful woman bathing and, in staccato-like fashion, finds out her name, sends for her, takes her in and you know the rest. Sometime later Bathsheba sends a two-word message to the king in 2 Samuel 11:5: “I’m pregnant.” David orders her husband Uriah to return from the battle. Little does Uriah know that his refusal to sleep with Bathsheba becomes his sentence of death, because after that David orders his general named Joab to make sure Uriah is killed in battle.

Tamar dresses up to look like a woman of the night. Rahab is a woman of the night and a Canaanite. Ruth is a Moabite and Bathsheba not only bathes openly, but later is instrumental in the death of one of David's sons—a man named Adonijah. That's quite a list of family members!

But there's more. Let's look at some men on Matthew's list. Are they any better? Hardly! Solomon, quite possibly the wealthiest man who ever lived, broke every commandment in the book. He had seven-hundred wives and three-hundred mistresses (1 Kgs 11:3). Solomon worshiped a multitude of foreign gods and even enslaved people to build his palace and God's temple. Solomon's son Rehoboam divided the kingdom—the north from the south. And then there was Manasseh. Manasseh filled Jerusalem with blood; 2 Kings 21:16 says that Manasseh “shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end.”

The purpose of a biblical genealogy is to give solemn honor to the final descendant—in Matthew's case, Jesus. Why, then, doesn't Matthew invoke the names of Israel's three lovely matriarchs—Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel? And why doesn't Matthew work around names like Solomon, Rehoboam, and Manasseh? It's not with glitter and Hollywood glitz that Matthew introduces us to Christ's family. There are no fireworks or fine pedigrees. There is rather a bunch of ramshackle relatives!

What do you do with your ramshackle relatives? Let 'em have it, right? Hold a grudge. Stay bitter. Walk around with a chip on your shoulder. Right? Maybe that's us, but that's not Jesus.

“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name **Jesus**, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). “**Jesus**” means “**Yahweh (the Lord) saves.**” Jesus saves his people. Who are his people? Tamar, who deceived Judah. Rahab, who sold herself to men. Ruth, who grew up worshiping a violent and murderous god. Bathsheba, who left Uriah for David. Solomon, who began so good only to finish so bad. Rehoboam, who ripped a nation in two. And then there was Manasseh, the longest tenured and most evil of all the 39 kings to sit on the thrones of either Israel or Judah.

The point of it all? *Lower your expectations!* Take your list of unrealistic family expectations and tear it up. Let go of your impossible demands, your absurd assumptions, your

ungodly ultimatums. And replace them with what? Replace them with forgiveness; the forgiveness Jesus won for you. How did he do it?

Jesus not only chooses ramshackle relatives. Jesus also chooses fishermen instead of Pharisees, sinners instead of Sadducees, and harlots instead of Herodians. Climactically, Jesus chooses thorns for his crown instead of silver and gold, and spit and blood instead of sweetness and light. His choices lead to torment and torture and darkness and death.

And this led to the greatest shock of all. “Don’t be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, he is risen, as he said.” Jesus is life overriding death and making all things new—even you.

For many Matthew 1:1–17 reads like a telephone book containing names no one cares about – the very inspiration for everyone’s worst stereotype of going to church, hearing the preacher drone on about so and so begat so and so. But to those of us who know what it’s like to expect perfection in our families, Matthew’s list means letting go of false hopes and unrealistic expectations and replacing them with forgiveness, a clean slate, and a new beginning. That’s why Matthew’s list means, why for all of our families Matthew’s list means, *everything!* Amen.