

October 21, 2018 - Rev. Seth D Jones
Women of the Old Testament
Tamar: A Biblical Trickster for Justice
Scripture: Genesis 38

This week, we are again presented with a complex story.

There are a lot of people involved here,
so let's take a moment and review what is going on.

Tamar is given in marriage to Er, son of Judah, who has two sons -
Er and Onan.

Judah is one of the 12 brothers of Israel, and is the only one who defended Joseph when
the other brothers wanted to kill Joseph.

Don't take that to mean that Judah is some kind of paragon of righteousness,
however.

Er dies without giving Tamar a child, or as Scripture says,

Er was wicked in the sight of the Lord and the Lord put him to death (38:7). Judah
calls on Onan, Er's brother, to fulfil his duties according to the Levirate marriage
tradition, and to impregnate Tamar so that Er's line will continue.

Onan does not fulfil his duty and Lord judges Onan evil, and Onan is put to death
by God as well.

Judah, being the patriarch of the family and responsible for ensuring the lineage of the
family, promises his youngest son, Shelah, who is still a child, to Tamar.

In the meantime, Judah sends Tamar back to her father's house to stay until Shelah
grows up.

Levirate marriage rules are strange and, to us, bizarre.

As far as we know, in ancient Mesopotamia and the Levant, levirate marriage was a way
of ensuring the purity of the family line.

The way it worked was, if a woman is given in marriage to a family, and the
husband dies, it is the responsibility of the brother of the husband to care for the
widow and make sure the family line continues with her.

The practice is a logical outcome if women are property to be exchanged and
passed from one man to another for the purpose of creating sons for the family.

On the positive side, levirate marriage was also a protection for the
widowed woman to ensure she doesn't die in poverty.

If it sounds oppressive and demeaning to women, well, you share that
view with the writer of this story in Genesis.

And probably with Jesus as well.

He deals with this in the Gospel of Matthew in Chapter

Before we go any further, we need to deal with all the sex in this story.

This is not really a story about sex, as much as some people may want to make it out to be, even though it involves sex and sexual issues.

I think it is important to understand that the ancient world's hang-ups about sex are not our hang-ups about sex,
which are as numerous and bizarre as the ancient world's hang-ups. People in the ancient Near East did not think about sex the way we do today, nor did they in Jesus' time, or in the Middle Ages.

So if we make this story about sex, just know that we are saying more about what we think about sex today than anything really going on in this story.

That said, the sexual elements in this story speak to the embodiment we spoke of last week.

The use of sex to gain some recognition or for power or to manipulate is still true today, by both women and men.

This is not a justification nor is it a condemnation, but in order to read this story, we have to overcome the cultural hangups we have about sex.

Because what's really going on here is what it means to live in integrity in the midst of an oppressive world.

The problem here is that Judah is not fulfilling the commandments that are in place in a very patriarchal society to also protect women.

This story, just by the words on the page, speaks and ends respectfully of Tamar. The problem, and it is a big problem, is Judah not honoring the commitments and promises he has made to a widow for whom he is responsible.

We, the men in the room, need to recognize when a Bible story is laughing at us and showing up a ridiculous, oppressive system for what it is.

As Midrash Rabba says,
The Torah laughs at men.

Over and over again.

Now that we understand this, we can see what Tamar is really up to here.

Tamar is in a tradition that is in all mythologies and religions worldwide.

Tamar is a trickster.

In Celtic traditions, tricksters took the form of fairies, the great magician Merlin, and Puck, the fairy king in Shakespeare.

In Hinduism, Krishna, the blue god of Love, and Hanuman, the monkey king, are both renowned tricksters.

In the Caribbean, Anansi, the spider, is a great trickster.

Islam has djinns, or genies, who are amoral actors of the spirit realm who seek to wreak havoc in the human world.

The Norse legends have Loki, who is continually interfering with both the gods of Asgard and the humans.

Native Americans have several tricksters, the most common being Coyote. And Buddhism has a whole array of incarnations of Buddha who are also tricksters, such as Padmasambava and the Buddha himself.

And we have already talked about a few tricksters in Scripture -
Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah would all fall into that category.

And, just as an aside, the name Jacob, of whom Judah is a son, means *trickster*.

What is it that Tricksters do?

What a trickster does really has little to do with the outcome.

The primary work of a trickster is

to undermine,

hold up for people to see,

and present the systems that are in play in whatever the situation is.

So in order for a person to truly be an effective Trickster, they have to see through and understand what's actually going on in their culture

and then get everyone in the story to play along with their plan in order to hold up the mirror.

So again, we're presented with a story, just as we were with Rachel & Leah, where the narrator of the story shows that the system that is in place is messed up and working directly against God's desires for humankind and the future.

Tamar has had quite a few years to plan this whole trick against Judah.

Once Shelah is of age, Judah does not fulfill his promise.

Tamar is at her father's house, but not the property of her father anymore.

She is Judah's possession. And Judah is not watching out for her future.

I find it curious that God deals directly with Er and Onan at the beginning of the story, but has somehow disappeared in this part of the story.

This also, I believe, is intentional.

God does not need to involve himself in this part of the story because Tamar is presented as an autonomous free agent capable of insuring her own future.

Don't you think it is interesting that a Bible text that is almost 3000 years old is presenting a woman in this way?

I do.

Once Tamar realizes Judah is not going to fulfill his promise, she takes off her widow's clothes and puts on her best clothes while covering her face with a veil. She waits outside of the Gate of Enaim,

which means The Gate of the Opening of the Eyes.

Tamar knows Judah, and knows what his proclivities are.

Scripture says,

Judah *thought Tamar to be a prostitute.*

Judah asks for her services, and the negotiation begins.

Judah promises a goat for the opportunity to be with Tamar, but Tamar knows Judah better than that. He has already proven his word is not good.

So Tamar negotiates the three things that define the personhood of Judah in the public world -

his signet, which is used to sign business documents;

his cord, which identifies his standing in the community;

and his staff, which is used as the symbol of his power in the land he lives -
for a guarantee of the future payment of the goat.

In order for a trickster to pull off whatever it is they are trying to do, which is to hold up in high relief the outrageousness and oppressiveness of some human system or behavior so people can see it for what it is, she has to know deeply the ways of the world around her.

She needs to know all the loopholes and pressure points of the culture.

She needs to understand well how people will react.

And this is what Tamar knows about Judah, his family, the culture she lives in, and the people around her.

After Judah's servant is unable to find the prostitute to give the goat to and get his master's signs of power back, Judah gives up on his symbols in order to protect his image.

And then, Tamar shows up in the area again, 3 months pregnant.

Someone, we don't know who, calls Tamar out to Judah and tells him Tamar has *played the whore.*

(It is not outside the realm of possibility that Tamar has set this up.)

Judah sentences her to death by fire.

When she is brought out to be burned, she says,

Yeah, before we do this, just make sure whoever owns these things gets them back, because he is the one who made me pregnant (38:25).

Judah now sees.

His eyes are now opened.

Tamar has cornered Judah into admitting publicly that he has

not fulfilled his promise,
nor has he been a fair player in his community,
nor has he done what needs to be done to fulfill his great-grandfather Abraham's
legacy.

As one commentator on this story says,

*(This) story makes the point that those whom society has traditionally revered
and respected are not necessarily worth of reverence and respect¹.*

Tamar has guaranteed her position in the legacy of the family.

Tamar has undermined the very system that would have provided for her in order to
make sure she is provided for.

Like Rachel and Leah and Rebekah and Sarah and Eve before her,
Tamar has taken on with her body the suffering and requirements for the future of
God's people.

And in doing this, Tamar puts herself in direct lineage as an ancestor of David and Jesus.
If you look at the ancestry of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, Tamar shows up in the list
(Matt 1:3).

Jesus is walking in the tradition of his ancestors,
especially if we think of Jesus as a trickster.

Remember what a trickster does -

he holds up the systems of oppression and status and inequality in high relief.
The Cross, Jesus' work of atonement, does a lot of things with and for us, but one of
the strangest and most powerful things it does is relativize the world around its
truth.

In the shadow of the Cross,
the emptiness of empires,
the presumptions of the powerful,
the recklessness of the rich,
the iniquities of intelligence and income
are all shown to be false and failed attempts to take the dignity of
others away
and pretend to be like God with their fellow human beings.

Is this not also what Tamar does on a smaller scale?

Aside from all the need to affirm Jesus' genetic and royal ancestry in Matthew's
genealogy,

this may be a better reason for Tamar to be in the list in Matthew.

The best part of Jesus' great trick which highlights the soft power of God over the hard
ways of humanity is what Jesus does after the Cross.

¹ from an article entitled "Tamar: The Eye-Opener", by Robin Cohn. Found at www.robincohn.net. Accessed 10/16/18.

The Resurrection shows once and for all that
our dignity,

our future,

our self-awareness,

and our power

lie with God's life-giving and loving presence.

We are people of the Resurrection and in that knowledge lies our dignity and our integrity, in the same way Tamar somehow maintains her integrity and dignity even while faking out the most powerful man in the region.

Her goal is justice and a future that is not mired in despair and failure.

She achieves that.

Tamar shows us that the work of justice is

gritty,

hard,

willful

and intelligent work.

In the trickster spirit of Tamar and of Jesus,

how will we,

as people of the Book and of the Resurrection,

seek justice for others and ourselves in a world of human systems of power?

Amen.