

When my maternal grandfather was in his twilight years, but before he went into hospice, he lived a widower in his home, having lost his wife of 70 years a couple years prior. He had no siblings remaining, nor was he aware of any other living relatives other than my mom, uncle, and sister. Out of nowhere, a man called him on his rotary dial phone, claiming to be a distant cousin of his. He had researched their family history at the library and had found a bunch of old newspaper articles about their distant relatives' exploits in the mid- to late 1800s. He found my grandfather in the phone book, identified common relatives, and after my mom did some sleuthing to make sure the guy was legit, they invited him to visit. As it turned out, the man was completely legit, and both were super excited to share stories about their family and find out there was another relative they had never met. The man shared a folder full of genealogy, along with newspaper articles he had printed out at the library concerning their ancestors.

Within these stories published in the paper was one concerning a relative who had a long-standing feud with a neighbor. The last straw for the neighbor was when my ancestor, John Walker, accused him of being a bootlegger. The neighbor met him on a piece of land John owned and said he'd surely kill him by sundown. He made good on his threat. He followed him down to the general store, John ran back toward home to get his own gun, and the

neighbor followed. He crouched in the grass and shot him dead.

Another story came from Charles Walker, a generation earlier than John Walker. Charles was drunk, and the newspaper made it a point to put that fact in parentheses, in the middle of the sentence. It read, "Thomas murdered his brother Charles (He was drunk) over a cow." Thomas bought a cow from Charles for \$50 and paid him \$20 upfront, leaving \$30 to pay. Charles said nothing about the debt for quite some time, but later he remembered and demanded the \$30. Thomas claimed that Charles burst into his house drunk and threatened him with an axe, leading Thomas to pull out his gun. The rest of the story is pretty self-fulfilling.

Yet another relative was out chopping wood when his wife inside observed him just falling to the ground. In a panic, she enlisted her numerous children to bring their father inside and lay him on the bed. All night, as they awaited the doctor's arrival, they nursed him with hot stones on his feet. The doctor arrived in the morning and informed them that he was dead the moment he hit the ground, likely from a cardiovascular event. It's hard to imagine that less than 150 years ago, we were still trying to treat heart attacks with hot stones on someone's feet, and now someone's heart can be shocked back into rhythm and a life saved. Funny how things get better over time.

Yes, it is hilarious to me because these stories don't fall into the "too soon" category for me when it comes to making light of family history and how far we've come from the days of shotgun duels over cows and trying to cure serious cardiovascular issues with hot stones. Of course, in any time and place and generation, violence is not acceptable and is certainly not laughable. But once we have faced our family history in all its fullness, sometimes these stories can be put in the "mildly entertaining and somewhat laughable" category.

In all seriousness, though, we all have these stories in our distant and not-so-distant family past. We have to admit that our ancestors did things that were ignorant, embarrassing, shameful, and just plain wrong. We have to admit that we had no control over their actions, and yet, as our scriptures remind us over and over again, the sins of previous generations visit upon subsequent generations. We have to admit that some of the same vices and wrongdoing our ancestors engaged in did indeed filter down to us. But once we have faced all that, we get to learn. We discover how we might cause new growth in faithfulness for the next generation and the next and even subsequent generations after that.

The genealogies in Matthew and Luke show us that when we face our past – in all its beauty and brokenness, in all its messy and messed-up fullness – we can change the course of the future, even beyond what we imagined possible. But

nothing can be changed until it is faced. So let's face this difficult genealogy together, knowing where it leads, and knowing that if the early, fledgling Christian movement could face its brutal and messed-up roots, so can we, especially, and perhaps most importantly, in our positions of relative wealth and power and educatedness in our own time.

Matthew starts off making sure we know that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah. Scholars debate which genealogy between Matthew and Luke carries more accuracy, and some are quick to point out the errors in both gospels' genealogies. But logical and factual and historical accuracy, as we well know, are not the main point of many of our scriptures. The writers of each of those gospels has a particular angle on what it means for Jesus to have come from a certain ancestry, a certain point to get across.

Today, we focus on Matthew's angle, which wants us to see that Jesus came to us from people both Jew and gentile, so that when Jesus issues his great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, it makes sense that he sends the disciples out into the world to preach the gospel to all nations, including gentiles. Matthew wants us to see that Jesus comes from royal – albeit flawed and questionable – ancestry. Matthew pushes for us to notice the historical divisions that mark turning points in a people's history, points which draw the people closer and closer to the need for and ultimately to the actual

arrival of the Messiah. Matthew desires for us to see that deeply flawed people still have a part to play in bringing Jesus into the world. he wants desire us to see that in God's time, through generational healing, all things are brought closer and closer to the coming of our Lord.

Matthew illustrates for us that our unity in Christ goes back to Father Abraham and Mother Sarah. We all begin with the ones God promised would begin a lineage with descendants that would number the stars.

And yet these are also people who didn't believe God's promise at first. Sarah laughed when God promised a son. Abraham had Ishmael by his handmaid Hagar, and Sarah kicked Hagar and Ishmael out of her home, sending them into the wilderness to die. And God tested Abraham's faithfulness by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. In the end, God provided a ram to sacrifice instead.

But even in the beginning, we have a complicated family history, including a God who tests faith by asking for human sacrifice, and it's not easy to tell what is sin and what is God's will and what got mixed up between the two. But things like marginalizing people and obeying a call to human sacrifice must be faced in order for us to change into the sort of faithful people that make disciples of Jesus Christ.

In this genealogy we face the fact that Jesus descended from people who

hated their siblings, those who refused to follow God's law to protect others, and those who had to do desperate and risky things to follow God's law and survive.

Jesus descended from Judah, who sold his brother into slavery. Remember that? Joseph with his coat of many colors, sold into slavery in Egypt so his brothers could get rid of him once and for all? That was Judah's idea.

And Jesus descended from Perez, Judah's son, and Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law. Typically understood as a prostitute, Tamar has much more to her story than that. If we look at her story from a Jewish perspective, a lot of the baggage Christians have historically attached to her choices disappears. First of all, Judah acquired Tamar as a wife for his firstborn son, Er. Acquired, as in, she did not have a choice who she married due to the customs of her day. When Er died, the custom of the day dictated that to protect Tamar, his widow, Judah would give her to his second-born son, Onan. This would keep Tamar in the family by allowing her to bear a son to continue Er's lineage, following the levirate marriage law of Judaism. But Onan refused to get Tamar pregnant because he knew he wouldn't inherit as much from his father if he had his own son. To make matters worse, Judah refuses to continue following the levirate marriage law. He should give Tamar to his youngest son to keep her from becoming a widow, but having seen two sons die already, thinking Tamar is cursed in some way, he won't

follow the law. The last way Tamar can stay in the family is by having a child with Judah, her father-in-law, which would have been perfectly right under God's law. But Judah refuses to allow this to happen as well. This throws Tamar into desperation, leading her to pose as a prostitute and veil her face in order to seduce Judah and become pregnant with a son. In the end, Judah admits that Tamar was in the right. She followed God's law and remained loyal to the family of her first husband.

And so Tamar gives birth to twin boys, Perez and Zerah. Perez, whose name means "barrier-breach", was named after the way in which he was born, a breached baby.

And Perez continues the family lineage that leads to Jesus. Without Tamar's assertion of what was right under God's law, Perez would not have been born.

Judah had to face his sin of putting a woman at risk by prizing inheritance and wealth over following God's law to protect the most vulnerable. And because he faced his sin, Tamar was shown to be in the right, saving her reputation as a faithful woman and her status as a member of a household.

According to Matthew's timeline, 14 generations after Abraham, we arrive at King David and King Solomon. Remember Ryan and my sermons on those guys? David, who took Bathsheba from her husband and had him killed on the front lines of battle? David, who lied

about his sin? Solomon, David and Bathsheba's son, who had a bunch of David's loyalists killed, used enslaved people to build the temple, and had way too many women in his life, including those whose religion he took on? Yes, those guys led us to Jesus.

And so in those histories, we face idolatry, exploitation, adultery, murder, and perhaps what our modern-day interpretations would call rape. All in the high rotten branches of Jesus' family tree.

From these rotten branches, we get rotten fruit. After all, when God's people demanded a king, God warned them about what the kings would do. And of course,

God was not wrong. God also warned the people that if they did not maintain the righteousness that was their part of the covenant, they would disinherit the land promised to them.

And it happened.

The people were taken by the Babylonians, forced into exile, by Matthew's timeline, for fourteen generations.

But it is within that exile that the people start to learn. They start to face their past. They start to repent, to turn around, toward God and toward the future that God intended for them.

After exile, instead of a king, the people have Zerubbabel. Finally, a return to the kind of leadership God intended for God's people. For the

cultural norms of the day, building a temple was the work of a king. The prophet Haggai, however, holds theology rather than political power at the center of temple-building. He points to Zerubbabel, the Persian governor of Judah, and also a descendant of David, as the one who would lead the rebuilding of the temple. In his prophecy directed toward Zerubbabel, Haggai states that God will “destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations” and “overthrow the throne of the kingdoms.” Because he and the people obeyed the voice of Haggai the prophet, and in turn the voice of God, the course of the people’s relationship with God took a turn.

The people faced their past community mistakes of asking for a king, following the idolatry and sin of their leaders, and putting their trust in people rather than in God to lead them. They faced themselves – their individual choices that led to their collective failures – and decided that they would turn around. Their repentance – their facing of their sin, then their turning away from sin and toward God – allowed God’s will to be done and began the regrowth of good fruit on the once-rotten branches of Jesus’ family tree.

When I was in high school, a nonprofit educational organization worked with faculty and students at my public school to start a student leadership group representative of the school’s diversity for those who wished to engage in monthly interracial dialogue during one class period. We

applied to the group by responding to a series of questions and were accepted based on our sincere commitment to the work. Back in the late ‘90s, these conversations were just charged enough to help push us and open us up and cause deep learning to happen. Each year, we started our time together by mapping out our “Universe of Obligation,” which was a diagram of concentric circles that we filled with the most important person, thing, etc. in the middle and the progressively lesser to least important things in the outer circles. After a session of discussing our values and identity as individuals, we would use later sessions to focus on the year’s study of a particular historical event that would be the basis for our discussion of contemporary racial issues. One year, we focused on the Holocaust and were visited by the grandparent survivors of students in the group; another year, we focused on the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s-1960s, receiving a visit from Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine; and another year we focused on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa; our visiting guests that year were an integrated band from South Africa. These speakers and historical events were connected through our discussions to the issues we faced as teenagers and as human beings with different backgrounds and personal and familial histories, which led to growing understanding of each other and our ways of being in the world.

Undergirding all these discussions was James Baldwin's idea that "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." The founder of the organization, Margot Stern Strom, a Jewish woman who grew up in Jim Crow Memphis, used this quotation to coin the nonprofit's name: Facing History and Ourselves.

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Not everything that is faced can be changed. We cannot change the past. As much as we would love to rewrite history to fit a particular narrative, the truth of what happened still exists. No matter how embarrassing, no matter how shameful, the truth still stands. We cannot change the past, but we can face the past to change long-standing patterns and rechart the future together.

This goes for our society, our families, and our individual choices – we cannot change what we have done, no matter how hard we try to rationalize our behavior, no matter how hard we try to tell a different story. The truth is the truth, and God knows it all, no matter how hard we try to rationalize and sugar-coat and hide it.

Not our families, not our individual behavioral patterns, not our human history – none of these patterns can be changed until it is brought to light, until the truth is told about it, and until it is discussed, debated, challenged,

and improved. Nothing can be changed until it is faced.

Like God's people through the ages, we can face what we have done and turn around – repent, in theological language – toward the life-giving and life-saving truth found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to help people face their sin and show the way to make it right. And so it is no accident that we get two listings of Jesus' messy, complicated, branch-rotten family tree, filled with adultery, rape, murder, war, and refugees, but also with beautiful intercultural unions, multiracial children, faithful assent to divine callings, and a line of faithfulness that leads us, even us, to the savior of the world.

So let us face our individual, familial, and community past with courage, knowing that even in our Savior's family tree, rotten branches did, indeed, bear good fruit once again. Amen.