

“ADVENT INTENTIONS: LOVE ONE ANOTHER”

Matthew 1:1-16; I John 3:11, 16-24

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December 17, 2023

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Dennis Dewey changed my mind about genealogies. We rarely read them in church. In the first place, the names can be difficult to pronounce, for which the liturgist will not thank you. Secondly, no one remembers the names. Genealogies are an “eyes glaze over” kind of reading. When Dennis, a biblical storyteller, performed this text, I was just blown away.

It wasn't the fact that he had memorized all those names. He didn't recite them as a list of names, but as individuals that he seemed to know. With each name he took a step closer to his audience until he comes to the birth of Jesus, “who is called Messiah,” when he gently offers the infant to a person in the front row. With each step, each name, God comes a little closer, until suddenly, God is right there, in your arms. There's nothing about love in the passage, but somehow, the love of God seemed to be front and center when Dennis finished the reading. “Love is patient,” wrote Paul to the church in Corinth.

The genealogy tells Matthew's audience, that this moment, the birth of Jesus, was a long time in the planning. It's important to understand that this is not a family tree. It is one branch on the tree, one line of ancestors. There are no aunts and uncles. There is no switching back and forth between a matriarchal and patriarchal line. It's just one line, and if you pay attention to the details, you know, that the child whom Matthew will soon refer to as Emmanuel, God-with-us, almost didn't happen.

There are hiccups up and down the line. Let's start with Tamar. Her story is told in Genesis 38. Judah has three sons and marries the oldest to Tamar. When he dies before Tamar has any children, Judah instructs his next son to do his duty by Tamar. When he fails in his duty and subsequently dies, Judah promises his younger son when he gets old enough. When Judah fails to deliver on this promise, Tamar tricks Judah into “getting her with child.” When Tamar is accused of playing the harlot, Judah wants to have her put to death. When he learns that he is the father, he declares that Tamar has been more righteous than he. The story is scandalous, but Tamar seems to me to act as one who “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Something else Paul wrote about love to the church. Perez and Zerah are born. The line continues.

Rahab, the harlot, hid the spies that Joshua had sent into the city of Jericho. For this kindness, Rahab, the stranger, was welcomed into the faith community, and gave birth to Boaz. “Love is kind.”

Ruth, the Moabite woman, married into Naomi's family. When the famine was over and it was time for Naomi to return to Bethlehem, Ruth refused to leave her side, even though her husband had died and she had no obligation left for Naomi, she left her own people to travel with Naomi, saying, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Wherever you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my

people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die..." "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," said Jesus (John 14:13). Ruth, against all odds, will marry Boaz, and give birth to Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of King David.

Not a lot of love in just reciting the names, but lots of love in the stories, the sort of love that stands out even in the midst of scandal. Speaking of which, the other woman referred to but not named is Bathsheba. I wonder if it's a scandal too big to name the woman, or does the history around the story simply refuse to forget the name of Uriah whose love and devotion to David cost him his life. Greater love has none than to lay down his life for a friend.

Matthew writes in a fear-filled time. The holy family will have to flee to Egypt for their lives. Innocent children will be slaughtered. Israel is occupied territory. But there you are, holding the Messiah in your arms. He won't end the occupation. The danger won't go away. He's come to save you from your sins, Matthew tells us in the next chapter. He's got scandal and sins aplenty in his family background. But he's also got patience, kindness, hope, endurance, and righteousness as well. He's here to teach us about love, about how to love our enemies, about giving up our life for our friends. It's love even in the face of scandal that keeps the line going.

"For this is the message that we have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." Healthy faith communities are known by their love. This has always been so. First John focuses this love within the faith community, but Jesus never limited it in this way. John's community found itself in a hostile world.

"Love one another," for us, isn't limited to our friends at church. "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action," writes John. We feed the hungry, whatever their faith. There were strangers and foreigners who were crucial in keeping the messianic line going. We are not bound by custom, culture, or social class. We are bound by love alone, and the one thing that matters most in this world, in our lives... is into whose arms will we place the child who is born for us, the child who will show us how to love one another."

Amen.