Sunday, December 4, 1983
JESUS' FAMILY TREE
Matthew 1:18-25

As we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, let's look at his background, his family tree his genealogy. I recently read about an aristocratic Boston matron who spent years memorizing the genealogies of the Bible. When asked why she did this, she replied that when she got to heaven, she thought it would be nice to know who was related to whom.

Personally, I've never been too fond of these particular parts of scripture - these long lists of names which are difficult to pronounce. Yet we all know that genealogies can be quite revealing. Some people spend a lot of time and effort to uncover their own family background, and some are surprised when they find several unsavory characters among their ancestors.

The Gospel of Matthew, the first book in the New Testament, begins with a genealogy of Jesus. Here's a sampling: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

"Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar..." Matthew continues with the genealogy, and in 17 verses lists no less than 46 names, all the way back to Abraham.

At first glance it might seem that all this has little significance for us today. Yet a careful study of the listing by Matthew reveals that there is more to the list than at first meets the eye.

These first 17 verses in the Gospel of Matthew are, in reality, a subtle work of art, a creative way of telling who Christ is and how God works through various kinds of people.

There are three characteristics of this genealogy or family tree that are especially worthy of note.

1. First, look at the structure of the tree. It is clearly divided into three sections: from Abraham to David, then from King David to the captivity of the Hebrews by the Babylonians, and the third section from their return from Babylon to the time when Jesus was born.

This was Matthew's way of saying that Jesus was truly the son of Abraham and a continuation of all that God had been doing since the promise and covenant had first been made with Abraham.

Here is an expression of the faith that has sustained the Jews throughout all the centuries, namely, that God is purposeful and that history is not a "tale of sound and fury, signifying nothing," but a drama with meaning. The Jews never denied the element of mystery in the EBB and flow of events, but they never saw it as totally absurd.

2. A second aspect of the family tree is an even more subtle testament of faith. Matthew carefully lists 14 ancestors in each of these three divisions, and that number would have had a special significance to a first century Jew.

The Hebrew language has no numbers in it. The letters of the alphabet had to double for figures, as well. If you would take the Hebrew word for David and add up the numerical

equivalent of the consonants, it would come to 14. Therefore, by placing exactly 14 ancestors in each grouping, Matthew was affirming that Jesus was the Son of David, as well as the Son of Abraham.

Instead of merely recounting “who was related to whom,” Matthew chose to set forth his faith in a subtle art form. You miss part of the significance of the passage if you look on the surface and content yourself to pronounce the names correctly. Here is faith in a coded form, an intriguing way of bearing witness in more than one idiom.

3. But there is a third characteristic about this family tree that is even more significant than the first two, and it has to do with the individuals that Matthew selected to make up his list. In all these generations, he could have named literally hundreds of people, so he had to be selective. And if you compare the names that Matthew has listed with some of the other genealogies in the Old Testament in Chronicles or Kings, you will find many of the other names not listed here.

This underscores the fact that Matthew’s list was not purely historical. He selected these particular people and arranged them as he did to say something important both about God and about what Jesus had been able to accomplish in the days of his ministry.

Look, for example, at some of the particular individuals whose names are found here. Some of the well-known heroes of Israel’s history are included: Abraham, Jacob, and David, for example, but the list is by no means a roll call of the famous or extraordinary. In fact, most of the names are of people whose identity has been utterly lost in the shadows of antiquity. We know nothing about them whatsoever.

And some of those listed represent genuine human failure. Take, for example, men like Judah and Manasseh. Judah was one of the sons of Jacob who conspired against his brother Joseph and deceived his own father and later on was involved with his own daughter-in-law in an act of incest. Manasseh is identified as perhaps the most brutal and wicked king ever to reign in the history of the Hebrews.

Now, if Matthew is making no attempt to give a complete account of Jesus’ heritage, why do you suppose he pulled together this particular assortment of characters? I believe he was trying to say something very important about God, namely, that God is willing and able to work with people who are less than perfect and can bring incredible results out of very unlikely circumstances.

This is a point we all need to be reminded of again and again, for one of the oldest and most pervasive of all heresies is the idea that God is a perfectionist and will only work with totally pure instruments. I hear it all the time as people say, “God does not hear a sinner’s prayer” or “Until you rid yourself of sin, a holy God will have nothing to do with you.”

This is precisely the image that Matthew was attempting to refute by including people like Judah and Manasseh in Jesus’ family tree. Matthew is going back to the earliest image of God in the book of Genesis in the creation stories, when, in human language, God literally gets his hands dirty by digging into the earth and out of this forming human beings in God’s image.

The point is that God works with all materials, not just people who are already good or perfect. God works with sinners, with people who make mistakes. God works with individuals like

Judah and Manasseh, and if God can bring forth a Christ from the kind of background, then there is hope for all of us.

It's so easy to get discouraged by what is going on inside of us and around us. But God is patient and can work with anyone. The image of God that is presented throughout the history of our faith is that of bringing good from unlikely sources.

An old gardener told me years ago about a period of prolonged depression in his life and what brought him out of it. He was sitting along in his backyard — so dead inside that he felt no reason to go on living — and as he looked absently at the scene around him, it dawned on him: roses grow out of horse manure. Now, I admit this is not a very elegant image, but it broke the spell of depression that bound that individual, and it is perfectly consistent with Matthew's listing of Jesus' family tree: Jesus out of Judah and Manasseh.

Since that is true, there is hope for all of us. None of us is completely finished; God is still working with us and through us, creating and brining good things from us. With the worst of circumstances, God can do the best of things. Good works can come from prophets who are not pure and from politicians who are not pure.

There is one other unusual feature in the family tree of Jesus as described by Matthew. He includes the names of four women in his list, and not just any women at that, but two Gentiles and three persons around whose names scandal is associated. The four women named are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba.

For example, Rahab was a prostitute in the city of Jericho, and she was instrumental in helping Joshua's spies escape from that city, and here she now appears in the family tree of Jesus!

In addition, both Tamar and Bathsheba were people with whom scandal of another kind was associated in the Old Testament. The point is, again, that God works through all kinds of people. Jesus, of course, did the same. He accepted all people simply as human beings and as being equal in God's economy.

As someone said, "Jesus really did get the nouns and adjectives of human existence in the right order." He never allowed words like "male" or "female," "Jew" or "Gentile," "Saint" or "Sinner," to be definitive. These, after all, are only adjectives — descriptive modifiers pointing to certain aspects of an individual, but never the whole truth of the whole person. "Person," "human being" - these are the true nouns, and Jesus lived out this way of relating to people.

We can assume that Matthew's relationship with Jesus began to change his way of looking at people also. Before meeting Jesus, it would never have occurred to Matthew to include women in a genealogy table. But a seed had been sown.

I think some people study genealogies or family trees for the wrong reason: they want to find in their own background some famous individual so they can point with pride to the fact that they have ancestors who were outstanding and then this will add to their own stature.

But Matthew was not afraid to mention the failures, as well as the famous, in Jesus' family tree, because he knew that in the deepest sense, the ancestors in our family tree are not what make us what we are. We are all connected to God and to each other, and it is the "God connection" and the fact that God accepts us as we are and works with us, no matter how many failures we are part of or how many failures are in our backgrounds - it is this fact that gives us our worth.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all people in the world felt self-worth just because they knew they were a part of God’s creation? If we can overcome poverty and disease, the next step is to teach people to forget about the many labels, the adjectives that we put on people, and the wrong ones we attach to ourselves, and remember the nouns: person, human being, created in God’s image.

This is the Good News of the Advent season. Just as Jesus is God’s child from a mixed family tree, so also, we are God’s children for the same reason. Amen.