Portraits of the Promised Incarnation: Teacher of Righteousness
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Matthew 1:1-17

This Advent, our wreath lighting liturgies and my preaching (whether in the morning or the evening services or both), have been based on the various depictions that Isaiah and the Gospels give us of the one for whom we wait in this season. Isaiah portrays the One who is to come as a visionary judge, who inaugurates a kingdom where the lion will lie down with the lamb and the lamb and swords will be beaten into plowshares, a suffering. One who will not return evil for evil or break even a bruised reed. Mark shows Jesus as a mystic messiah, who preaches and lives a message that is hard for even his closest followers to understand (that’s why Dan Thomas calls them the Duh-sciples). It is hard to understand because it involves self-sacrifice, Jesus’ own and theirs. Luke depicts Jesus as a story-telling revolutionary, who, through his parables and actions, turns the world upside down. And on Christmas Eve, we’ll be looking at how John’s gospel shows us Jesus as God’s Word made flesh.

Today we’ll spend a little time looking at the emphasis of Matthew’s gospel on Jesus as the teacher and embodiment of a higher righteousness, a different righteousness (way of being right with God) than the scribes and Pharisees were practicing.

Matthew, written originally to a community made up largely of Jewish, and not Gentile Christians, is laid out in five sections of teaching to correspond with the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The most famous of those sections is Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount, but there are also discourses in Matthew 10, 13, 18, and 24.

Just a piece of the Sermon on the Mount for you now from Matthew 5:

‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
Hard words about righteousness.

Matthew shows Jesus as a teacher, but a teacher of a different sort of righteousness—a righteousness based in a compassion that is willing to go the extra mile, to turn the other cheek, to look on all people, all people—even those who have wounded us—as children of God.

Matthew's is the only gospel to begin with a genealogy of Jesus—Luke contains one, but it is later—and that genealogy sets up, in its way, what Matthew, and the Jesus who lives in and beyond its pages, wants to teach us about righteousness, about how people are right with God. Listen now for how the Gospel of Matthew begins. But before I start, be of good cheer—I'm not going to read all forty two generations of Jesus’ genealogy! Just the first section, from Abraham to the birth of Solomon. Listen now for God’s word to us.

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, 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,
and Perez the father of Hezron,
and Hezron the father of Aram,
and Aram the father of Aminadab,
and Aminadab the father of Nahshon,
and Nahshon the father of Salmon,
and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab,
and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth,
and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.
And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah...

I happen to know that some of you are big into genealogy. You’ve spent hour upon hour working on your family tree, going back six, seven, eight, nine or more generations, to the homeland or homelands of your ancestors. Sites like Ancestry.com and others make this work so much easier. But it is not simple.

My great-grandmother Eickstaedt, whose maiden name was Ketchum, was a real genealogy buff, back in the days before Ancestry.com; as was her daughter in law, my grandmother Nynah. Maude Ketchum Eickstaedt was a member of the D.A.R. The Daughters of the American Revolution. Anybody else here a member of the DAR? You can raise your hand, it’s okay. Rebecca is here. Rebecca you can raise your hand. You are DAR too, or you’re eligible for it. Like others in the D.A.R. My great grandmother Eickstaedt could trace her roots back to a Revolutionary War soldier. And she was proud of that.

I’ve spent a little time over the past few days researching different parts of my family tree, piecing together stories that I remember from my youth of to whom we are related. I know that on
my Mom’s side, some of my roots go back to Sweden and others to northern Germany, that’s where the Kueckers came from. On my Dad’s side, some of my roots go back to southern Germany, the Eickstaedts came from there, and others to England. Though I wasn’t able to document it, it is my understanding that I’m related to Anne Boleyn, one of the ill-fated wives of Henry VIII. We have common Boleyn ancestors. I’m also related to an outlaw nicknamed Tom, “Black Jack” Ketchum. Perhaps you’ve heard of him.

One thing that you discover when you research genealogy is that it is, first of all, a bit of an imperfect science. DNA typing helps, of course. But you go back far enough and you are relying on records and information that may or may not be entirely correct about people you’ve never met. Paternity cannot always be guaranteed. The possibility of scribal error or intentional misinformation exists. People have something invested in tying themselves back to a particular ancestor—whether it be a revolutionary war soldier or someone else.

A second thing you may come to understand is that what much of what makes genealogy fun is that it makes us curious about the stories of those in our family tree. What for instance, led my ancestor Elisha Garzee Ketchum to move from Massachusetts where he was born in 1826 to Illinois where he died? How did the Pearce family wind up in Nebraska? How did my William Carl Eickstaedt, my greatgrandfather, decide to become a veterinarian? Why did my ancestors move here from Germany, and Sweden, and England? All of the names on a family tree are tied to stories. You may know some of the stories of the famous people in your family tree. But all of them have stories, all the way back, there are stories. And would that we knew more of them, right? And not all of the stories are ones you might be particularly proud to share. Black Jack Ketchum is not someone who gets mentioned often at family reunions.

So Matthew, whose gospel is so concerned with righteousness, being in right relationship with God, begins his account of Jesus life and its meaning with a genealogy, a family tree, Jesus’ pedigree, as it were. Matthew starts with Abraham, the Patriarch of Israel, the one to whom God promised a son, and land, and many descendants-as many as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the beach. The one who set out at age 75 to move from his homeland to the place God would show him. Who laughed, and whose wife laughed, when they were told that she was pregnant with Isaac when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90. That’s a scary story, particularly the older you get. It’s the story of an improbably, in fact, seemingly impossible birth. Abraham, in Israelite imagination, was the model of faith, but he too had his doubts and his fears, and you can see them in the pages of Genesis.

The genealogy moves through 42 generations, until it gets to Joseph, husband of Mary, to whom Jesus was born. In the genealogy, the paternity question is left open.

Mary is the mother all right. And we’ll find out by the end of chapter one that God is the father. But we’ll also see a little righteousness at work. Joseph the supposed father wants to do the right thing. Even though he by all rights, according to the ancient laws could have had Mary stoned, he decides to divorce her quietly. Remember? To just set her aside quietly. But later he comes to
decide, after the visit of an angel, that rather than leaving Mary quietly, he will become the child’s earthly father.

The complexity of this birth, the conflicted way Joseph felt about it when he first found out Mary was pregnant, is summed up in the lyrics to the *Cherry Tree Carol*. I’ll read a few of the verses to you now.

*Then Mary said to Joseph, so meek and so mild “Joseph, gather me some cherries for I am with child” “Joseph, gather me some cherries for I am with child” Then Joseph flew in anger, in anger flew he “Let the father of the baby gather cherries for thee Let the father of the baby gather cherries for thee”*

*Then up spoke baby Jesus, from out Mary’s womb “Bow down ye tallest tree that my mother might have some Bow down ye tallest tree that my mother might have some.”*

An outlandish verse, isn’t it? But the carol gets to the heart of how complex this birth was for Joseph. Now if Joseph really knew his own genealogy, and not all of us know ours, he would know that his was an interesting genealogy indeed, filled with names of people who are tied to stories. Jacob, the trickster, one who wrestles with and bargains with God, but carries on in the promise. Then there’s Jacob’s son Judah, one of the twelve tribes, who protects his brother Joseph, a dreamer, from being killed, but about whom an interesting story is told. His daughter in law, Tamar, to whom he’s given three sons, each in succession to marry. Each of the sons dies. By ancient law Tamar would have been entitled to marry the fourth son of Judah. Tamar, a foreigner, was entitled to marry the fourth son of Judah. But Judah is not interested in losing another son, and Tamar’s track record at keeping husbands alive is not good. So he will not give his son to Tamar. So she engages in her own trickery when Judah won’t arrange for his son to marry her. She deceives Judah and when she’s pregnant with his offspring, but he doesn’t know that they are his and he is about ready to have her stoned, she shows up with a signet and a staff that he’s given her as a token. And then Judah says, “aha, she is more righteous, more right with God, than I am.”

Jesus’ genealogy also mentions three other women. Rahab, a prostitute, who protects the Israelite spies when they do reconnaissance on the city of Jericho and who secures their protection for when the city is overthrown. She’s part of Jesus and Joseph’s genealogy.

And Ruth, the faithful foreigner from Moab who stays with her mother in law Naomi and winds up becoming the grandmother of David the king through Boaz, Naomi’s kinsmen.

And then here’s David, himself a complicated figure. The greatest king Israel ever knew and perhaps the most deeply flawed. Jesus is related to David through Solomon, the genealogy says, and Solomon was born to the wife of Uriah. Now a little Bible quiz. You probably didn’t learn this is in the first several years of Sunday School, but what is the name of the wife of Uriah? Bathsheba. And the reason her name is not mentioned is because Matthew wants to make a point about Uriah being killed by the decree of David. David is not only an adulterer, he is a murder. And he is in Jesus’ genealogy!
All of those names are tied to stories. And not all of those stories are stories to be particularly proud of.

William Barclay, that great Scottish commentator on scripture, said of Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus that it tears down the walls between Male and Female (Matthew’s genealogy is the only one which mentions women) Jew and Gentile (all of the women mentioned are foreigners) and Sinner and Saint (so many of the stories tied to the names of people in Jesus genealogy, male and female alike, are complex, flawed and broken).ii

So the genealogy begins by tying Jesus to Abraham, the great figure of Hebrew faith. In a way it’s sort of saying that there is purity that goes all the way back. It’s like Jesus is part of the DAR. But as the genealogy unfolds the complexity of Jesus’ heritage becomes more and more obvious to those who know the stories. Righteousness in Matthew is about being in right relationship with God. That does not mean being absolutely perfect and without flaw. That does not mean that you look back on every instance in your past and say, “Aha, I did that right!” That does not mean that there aren’t stories in your family tree that are complicated.

Being in right relationship with God means being loved by God and called to love others and actually living that out.

I’ve been reading Ann Lamott’s book Stitches about how we stitch together life and meaning in a broken and hurting world. She reflects in the Newton shooter in the pages of the book. She writes:i

*Wasn’t the Newton shooter lost?*

*Who knows? There’s some disagreement here. I can’t believe that a God of love could throw this kid away. It was not his fault that he was so sick.*

*Whether we like it or not, we are somehow interconnected with the shooter, because we are connected to all of life. Thomas Merton wrote, “The one truth that would help us begin to solve our ethical and political problems [is] that we are all more or less wrong, that we are all at fault, all limited and obstructed by our mixed motives, our self-deception, our greed, our self-righteousness and our tendency to aggression and hypocrisy.”*

*Obviously we are worlds away from the shooter. But somehow he was part of the human family. We breathed the same air he did. Some of us choose to believe we are somehow all from God, huddled on this planet, surrounded by a hundred billion other galaxies, and yet somehow all return to God. Walt Whitman wrote, “Nothing is ever really lost, or can be lost, / No birth, identity, form- no object of the world. / Nor life, nor force, nor any visible thing” – although I have to add that evil, sickness, death and there being a hundred billion other galaxies sure complicate this picture. So I could be wrong.*
Nothing is ever really lost, or can be lost, no birth, identity, form, no object of the world, no light, nor force, nor any visible thing. What if that message is why Matthew starts his Gospel with this genealogy of Jesus?

And maybe what Whitman was trying to say is what the Apostle Paul said in Romans 8, which is this:

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

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i For information on The Cherry Tree Carol see: [http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Notes_On_Carols/cherry_tree_carol-notes.htm](http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Notes_On_Carols/cherry_tree_carol-notes.htm)
