

You are not beyond repair! Genesis 38

Here's a cartoon that recently appeared in the *New Yorker*.

We have an older family sitting on a couch under a banner that reads

World's most unemployable family.

The father is labeled *door-to-door encyclopedia salesman*

The mother is a handwriting analyst

The son is an appliance repairman

And the daughter is an abstract impressionist.

Abstract impressionism is a style of art,

and if you're wondering what abstract impressionism looks like,

then that's kind of the point, its understood and enjoyed only by a few.

What's this cartoon getting at?

I don't think it's mocking the unemployed; that's not the cartoon's purpose.

Rather, I think this cartoon is saying that we're living in changing times.

It's a statement about how certain jobs and types of products

are no longer needed or are of very little use,

In the age of the internet we don't need encyclopedias anymore,

And many of us, not everyone, but many of us *type* more words that we *write*.

And instead of fixing appliances it's becoming cheaper to replace them.

It's this third type of change that I want us to think about this morning,
the one represented by the out-of-work appliance repairman

It is becoming more common, isn't it, to hear people say that if something is broken,
then there is no value in repairing it.

I heard one of my friends recently explain

that instead of replacing the toner in his printer

it was actually cheaper for him to buy a whole new machine.

Isn't that remarkable?

Many of our products are only given one chance,

and then, when they fail, they're thrown on the scrapheap.

What about people?

What ought we do and think when *people* fail?

When it's a person who is broken, what hope of repair is there?

When *we are broken*, is there any hope that repairs can be carried out on us?

Today we continue hearing the story of Jacob's family as told in the book of Genesis,
Last week we saw that they form a complex family,
a family that has high levels of dysfunction,
a family full of broken characters.

Last week we heard a little bit about Judah,
 he was the one who suggested selling Joseph, his own brother, into slavery,
 and this week the focus is entirely on Judah and the start of his own clan:
 Ch 38.1 At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam
 named Hirah.
 As we're about to see,
 Judah has not yet plumed the depths of his own brokenness.
 Is there any hope for someone who is about to stoop so low?
 Is there any hope for those *of us* who are all too aware of our own failures?

Well, let's follow Judah as he heads off on his own and see what happens.

In v2 we're told that Judah marries a Canaanite woman.
 That seems like no big deal,
 except when we realize that in marrying a Canaanite
 Judah is rebelling against his family's tradition.

Abraham was very concerned that Isaac not marry a Canaanite
 but find someone from his own people,
 Isaac in turn had the same concern for Jacob,
 but Judah doesn't care!
 He displays no real discernment in his choice of a partner.

It's always a good idea to have on hand a few different Bible translations
 And we notice a subtle difference in the way the ESV describes this scene
 In the NIVs which we have here in church Judah *met* and *married* this woman,
 in the ESV he *saw* and *took* her, which gives a better sense of what's going on.
 He's not thinking with his brain, he's acting impulsively, without discipline.

Friends I feel it's important at this point to mention
 that God still has the expectation that we would choose life partners wisely,
and that we'd search for those partners only within God's people.
 1 Corinthians 7 is clear; Paul says you're free to marry whoever you like,
 as long as they are a believer.
 It's always been the way for God's people, we marry from within the family.

I understand that this can feel like an impossible restriction,
 and that many people feel they would rather live with a non-believing partner
 than a life of being single.
 But in pastoral ministry you do hear stories of women *and men*
 who have made the choice of a non-believing partner,
 and who carry with them a sense of sadness because of their choice.
 It's not spoken about publically out of respect to the partner, but it's real pain.
 There's pain from not being able to contribute fully to church life,
 pain in not being able to provide two models of adult faith for the children.

And so part of the design for marriage found throughout the Bible
is that we marry from within the spiritual family, but Judah wants none of it!

So Judah takes his wife and 3 boys arrive in quick succession.
what we see with the boy's arrival is a family sinking to the very bottom.
v6 Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.
7But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death.

We are not told what it was that Er did,
but it's interesting that this is the first time we've heard about God in a while.
It's just a brief reminder that God is watching all this unfold.
He's taking note of all the injustices,
and even though we don't know what Er did,
it must have been bad since he is the first one to feel God's immediate anger.

So with Er gone, our focus shifts to Onan, Judah's second born,
And here we have what has become an infamous passage of the Bible.
V8 Then Judah said to Onan, "Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a
brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother."
It was an ancient expectation that if a first-born brother died without an heir,
the next in-line needed to marry the brother's widow to provide an heir.

Note that Judah doesn't tell Onan to marry Tamar,
he's willing to give Tamar a child but not a husband,
and so we start to see Judah's indifference towards his daughter-in-law.
Either way, Onan isn't interested in playing his part:
V9 Onan knew that the child would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother's wife,
he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring for his brother. ¹⁰What
he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so he put him to death also.

Now verses 9-10 have been applied in various ways over the years:
Some people take this as a warning against contraception,
others take it to be a warning about masturbation.
But it's about neither of these things.
The reason God acts so strongly is because Onan is being selfish.
In terms of the family inheritance, Onan was next in line!
There was no way he was going to place another heir in front of him
by fathering a child and so he spilled his semen on the ground.
And so in turn God sends Onan to the grave to be with his elder brother.

Judah now becomes very nervous.
Could it be that his daughter-in-law Tamar was carrying some kind of curse?
It looks like she was the common factor in the demise of both sons,
And so, v11, Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your
father's household until my son Shelah grows up." For he thought, "He may die too, just like
his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's household.
The plan is to quietly remove Tamar from view altogether,

hoping that, with her out of the picture,
the bad fortune which had come upon his family might disappear with her.

The only problem is that Tamar was not the disappearing type,
Tamar was not one to simply let go of the injustices that she'd been dealt
Tamar decided to take matters into her own hands.

In time, Judah's wife died
and not long after that Tamar heard
that her Father-in-law was to visit his flocks as they were being shorn.
Tamar decides to act, For she saw, verse 14 that though Shelah had now grown up,
she had not been given to him as his wife.

Disguising herself as a prostitute,
She waits by the road which she knows Judah will be travelling on.
The fact she knows this trap will work
Says a lot more about Judah's morals and behaviour than hers;
She knows what he's like and she knows what kind of lure he'll take.

Seeing this prostitute on the side of the road, Judah cannot resist.
The terms of contract are exchanged,
and Tamar receives Judah's staff and his seal and cord as an *IOU*.
These were very precious items; identifying items.
Everyone would have known what Judah's staff looked like,
and the seal, attached to a cord and hung around the neck,
this is what Judah used to sign important documents,

Such is his impulsiveness and eagerness to sleep with this woman
he is willing to hand over his passport – that's what were talking about here.

And so the meeting is done and Judah continues on his way
completely unaware that he's just created an heir
through the deception of his own daughter-in-law.

There months later and as it starts to become known that Tamar is pregnant.
Because she is still officially betrothed to Shelah, Judah's third son,
she is guilty of bringing shame on the household,
and so with brute callousness and with deep hypocrisy
Judah issues the order Bring her out and have her burned to death

And so, at the very moment she is being dragged out to the pile of wood
as she makes her way through the sneers and insults raining down upon her,
as she is literally moments away from her death
Tamar plays her one hand,
a hand that she herself has put together,
a hand that's simply got to work:

“I am pregnant by the man who owns these,” she said.
And she added, “See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.”

You can imagine the silence as everyone’s eyes drop to the objects,
and then recognizing at least the staff,
their eyes would have lifted to Judah.
What’s he going to say?
Is he going to just ignore this new development?
Is he going to get even angrier and order the fire to be built even higher?

But when Judah finally speaks, what we hear are some of the most remarkable words of the OT, verse 26: Judah recognized them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not sleep with her again.

And so Tamar is spared and restored,
and she gives birth to twins,
and so she receives what was finally due to her and her first husband.

It’s a crazy story, isn’t it?
We see yet another generation of men in this family running amok
and treating the women shamefully,
and while we might admire Tamar’s nerve and fearlessness,
her deceptive actions raise some ethical questions for us
It’s clear that Tamar is been a victim here,
but how can two wrongs make a right?
Is she really righteous, or is she just as bad as the rest of them?
One thing that is clear is that despite the moral ambiguities,
God does act graciously towards Tamar in allowing her plan to work.

In any case, it’s an unhealthy habit to be pickling apart the righteousness of others.
What’s of greater benefit is to be looking into our own lives.
This is what Judah does when Tamar reveals what she’s been playing at.
Judah doesn’t say “*Ah, you evil woman! You’ve tricked me!*” He could have!

But in a remarkable twist, what we hear is a man who is finally sensing his own sin.
Verse 26 is remarkable because it’s a moment of incredible repentance.
Judah is an absolute pig of a man, but then, because of Tamar’s trickery,
he manages to catch a glimpse of what he’s become and we see a change.
Keep an ear out for Judah as we continue on with Jacob’s family,
he starts to come across as a much more noble character;
this change appears to be genuine.

Judah proves that *nobody*, no matter how awful and messed up they’ve become,
Nobody is beyond repair,
Nobody needs to be rendered obsolete
Everyone has a future in the plans and purposes of God.

Just come forward with me to the NT, to the book of Matthew
 and we'll see the place both Judah and Tamar have in the purposes of God.
 Matthew of course, is all about Jesus Christ,
 and the opening chapter gives a sketch of Christ's family tree:

Matt 1.1 This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:
²Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his
 brothers, ³Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.

Judah the merciless scoundrel,
 Tamar the poorly treated victim who resorts to entrapment
 both precious to God,
 and even though they couldn't have known,
 both playing a part in God's ultimate plan to bring Jesus into the world.
 I think it's amazing that these ancestors of Jesus
 were moments away from being killed,
 the whole history of God's work would have been dramatically altered

This comes as good news for those who are perhaps a little like Tamar,
 those who've suffered at the hands of evil people.
 You are still precious and God still has a purpose for you.
 You might only see problems, but God, who is working on a universal scale,
 he might just be doing something incredible in you and through you.

And for those who feel that they might be a little but like Judah,
 if you're one of these ones whose sharp edges are affecting others,
 then like Judah, you are not a hopeless case either,
 God can work a miracle in you.
 Ask Jesus and he will wipe your slate clean
 and his Holy Spirit will help you effect change.

You know the Japanese have an artform which they call *Kintsugi*.
 It's where they take a broken bowl or plate, and they join it together using a
 type of golden glue. The idea is that the mended piece continues to have a life
 and that the repair work adds its own type of beauty. They are beautiful...

This is what we see with Judah:
 God takes a broken man with sharp and jagged edges
 and he creates something beautiful and noble.

And friends he's still doing it with men and women today.
 If anyone is in Christ, Paul says in 2 Cor 5.17 the new creation has come:
 The old has gone, the new is here.
 You are not beyond repair.
 If Judah can be turned around, God can do the same in you. Amen.