Saved by Divine Compassion: The Mystery and Complexity of Human Relationships

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I

The multiplicity of male – female relationships that make up the fabric of our lives begin out of a desire to be in touch, to have someone close to our heart. Relationships require us to open up to that touch, and in opening ourselves, we become vulnerable. Vulnerability is something we seek and fear: it enriches our lives and causes us pain. In our relationships, vulnerability enables us to love, enables us to give up ourselves to the other. At the same time we are careful to protect ourselves, thereby creating periods of doubt and moments of certainty. In his book *The Sacrament of Love*, Paul Evdokimov suggests that we continuously dishonor our relationships with lies and hypocrisy, we continually hide from our desire for love, because it is the deepest search for truth, the very voice of being.[1] In reflecting on my relationships, I recognize that it is easy to take the ones I love for granted. It is easy to rely on roles and customs that are believed to span generations. But research in a variety of fields, ranging from biblical scholarship to the natural sciences, suggests that ongoing dialogue may be required. The multiplicity and complexity of our relationships make it impossible to rely on clichés or to fit this topic into neat definitions.

While we no longer live in a time and place in which women are considered undeveloped males—a view suggested in the writings of some Church fathers—or identified as property and denied basic civil rights, remnants of these ideas still impact relationships both here and abroad.[2] And yet in looking at biblical accounts, we find rich narratives that challenge our assumptions. As one biblical scholar reminds us, the Bible "is not only contradictory but complex", in revealing conflicting definitions of male – female relationships.[3]

In Genesis, we are reassured that relationships are created by God and exist to bring us back to God. In the beginning, God created man and woman through an act of love, a gift, a mystery of "pure grace and gratuity."[4] Woman created from the side of man shares the same human nature and destiny. Alone each is incomplete. The description of God

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[1] Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 31.

acting through one creature to generate another affirms that the male – female relationship as God intended is balanced and equal. In his fifteenth homily on Genesis, St. John Chrysostom writes that woman is, "of the same kind, of the same properties, of equal esteem and in no way inferior … They are interdependent with equal control over creation."[5]

What is more often remembered, however, is the Genesis description of woman's cooperation with sin. For most of my adult life, I have pushed back the tendency to blame Eve in order to justify institutionalized imbalance in male – female relationships. But Genesis is quite clear in stating that Eve is the target of the first lie, even though it must be said that both Adam and Eve were free to choose. Eve was unable to stand up to something that was beyond her imagination.[6] Paradoxically, her very vulnerability—which should have drawn her closer to God—led to a catastrophic turning point in the way her relationship was experienced.

In the beginning, male and female were together and were not ashamed. But starting with that first encounter with evil, the human ability to perceive and experience love and intimacy with God and the other has been shrouded by shame and fear and by the creature's overwhelming desire for self-preservation. Yet in his divine compassion, God does not abandon us to the lies and hypocrisy Evdokimov mentions, even as he preserves our vulnerability. This gives us the possibility to be open to the other, so that we might have an intimation of the divine life that is intact in each person. We can be optimistic, knowing that God's divine compassion enables us to manifest his love uniquely in every relationship we form.

In ways unknown to us, we are participants in God's saving plan. Every life is unique and every relationship is extraordinary. Relationships are not formed by passive players devoid of personality and free will. To love is to take a risk that we frequently try to avoid. It requires courage that may go unrewarded. It requires initiative that may be thwarted. But as much as we might try, we cannot entirely avoid taking a chance with each other. It inevitably leads to a crisis in our understanding of who we are. But the Gospel states—and experience confirms—that while there are no guarantees, and while evil continues to wreak havoc among us, from time to time we must nevertheless find the courage to risk removing the thick skin that keeps us from experiencing the vulnerability, openness, and transparency that make relationships possible.

II

Among the many accounts of relationships in our tradition, the stories of the women referenced in St. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1-17) offer a particularly exquisite portrayal of divine compassion and healing. This gospel passage, which traces the generation of the descendants from Abraham to Joseph, is read every year on the Sunday before the Nativity of Our Lord. While it should be obvious that women were needed to produce each successive generation mentioned in the genealogy, women are nevertheless largely ignored. Only four are acknowledged by name. Their sur-

[2] For example, see Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man," trans. Henry Austin Wilson, in *Select Writings and Letters of Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa*, vol. 5 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1893), 387–427. Peter Brown discusses the influence of Galen's description of women as "failed males" in *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 10. Paul Evdokimov cites Aristotle, who sees the male as the measure of all things and the female as a defective male, in *Sacrament*, 23.

[3] For a well-documented discussion of the complexities and contradictions of biblical texts describing male – female relationships, see Jennifer Wright Knust, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 10.

Tamar disguises herself as Judah passes by. Marc Chagall, 1960.

prising acknowledgement suggests that they hold special significance.

Even more surprising is how their stories in the Old Testament exemplify in remarkable ways the mystery of divine compassion. Drawn into dangerous situations that lead to unconventional relationships, these women participate in the fulfillment of the prophecies that foretell the coming Messiah and the new creation. All four of these women are bound up in situations that expose them to extreme peril. Yet in spite of—or because of—their vulnerability, they exhibit courage, initiative, and perseverance, which open their hearts. As we look at their stories, we will try to discern what makes them recipients of divine compassion and genuine forerunners of the fifth woman mentioned in the genealogy: the young woman, Mary, who is to become the Mother of God.

The four Old Testament women listed in the genealogy are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. There is no explicit reason for their presence. All are outsiders and come from backgrounds that challenge our moral sensibilities. Three are widows who engage in questionable—even scandalous—relationships, and one is a prostitute. Scholars have offered several interpretations for St. Matthew's selections. Raymond Brown first considers the possibility that these four women are listed because they "were regarded as sinners and their inclusion … foreshadowed the role of Jesus as the savior of sinful men." But it seems odd that these four women would be included for that reason alone, since all men and women are sinners. Another interpretation suggests that by including "foreign" women in the genealogy, Matthew shows God's saving promise extending to all, but I find it unlikely that the mere naming of four women would have that kind of impact. A third interpretation, according to Brown, is that there is something extraordinary in the union these women have with their partners, which gives them a prominent role in salvation history. This is not exactly true for all the women: Rahab's story, for example, is quite separate from her role in the genealogy.[7]

III

Going beyond these interpretations, it seems to me that, in their own distinctive ways, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba challenge our ideas about God and divine compassion. They prepare us for something new and surprising, even shocking. To paraphrase Evdokimov, these four women give us infinitely more than a biological continuation of the race.[8] In confronting dangerous choices, they not only take initiative; they

[4] André Louf uses "grace and gratuity" to describe God's love for Mary, the mother of our Lord. In describing the inexplicable qualities of her love, he makes clear that God in his divine compassion has not denied men and women the same inexplicable gift. André Louf, *Mercy in Weakness: Meditations on the Word*, trans. John Vriend (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1998), 60.

[5] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*: 1–17, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 74 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), Homily 15, 197.

[6] On the illusion of sin and women's role in the history of grace, see Jean Daniélou, *In the Beginning…: Genesis I-III* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1965).

display courage which opens them up to divine compassion. In this way, they are worthy precursors of the Mother of God, whose extraordinary courage leads ultimately to the healing of male–female relationships in the new creation.

Let us begin with the story of Tamar. In Genesis 38, we learn about her relationship with her father-in-law, Judah, one of the twelve patriarchs and the fourth son of Jacob. Tamar is probably a Canaanite, and we know from the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew's gospel that Canaanites are lower than dogs. Yet, surprisingly, the oldest son of Judah marries Tamar. But he dies, and so, according to the Levirate law, Judah's second son is to take Tamar in marriage. When the second son also dies, Judah prevents his third son from marrying Tamar, thus breaching the law and making her a childless widow. In the community, she becomes a nameless woman—cut off, abandoned, and disgraced. She is the property of Judah and according to the law, her only opportunity for having a life is with his family, but she is essentially disowned by him and sent back to her own people.

Tamar sees an opportunity to regain her life after she learns that Judah's wife has died. Since he has not allowed his third son to marry Tamar, she disguises herself as a prostitute and waits along the side of the road for Judah to pass by after sheep-shearing. For Tamar, seducing Judah is the only way to make him fulfill his lawful obligation to her. We don't know how long she waits, alone and unprotected. When Judah appears, he apparently does not recognize Tamar, making the reader wonder how he might have been celebrating after shearing his sheep. Moreover, he seems to have spent all his money, so even though he is interested in this woman, he realizes he cannot pay her. Not wanting to pass up the opportunity, however, he offers the would-be prostitute a goat.

Not a harlot, Tamar is not interested in payment. She engages in this charade hoping to reenter Judah's family and the broader community. Yet she knows she will need proof to protect her child if one is conceived and to counter inevitable accusations of promiscuity, which would lead to a death sentence. She must prove that Judah, who is legally responsible for her, is the father of her child. To protect herself and the child that might come from this union, Tamar asks Judah for his ring, cord, and staff—all signs of Judah's legal identity and pledges of surety. Later, when it is reported that Tamar is pregnant, Judah calls for Tamar to be burned. Tamar, facing the horror of this sentence, produces the three items that identify Judah as the father. His own sin exposed, Judah offers an extraordinary response. He expresses compassion and remorse for his unwillingness to take care of Tamar. With prophetic insight, Judah says, "She is more righteous than I" (Gen. 38:26), and Tamar is saved and restored to Judah's household. Eventually, she gives birth to the twins Perez and Zerah, with Perez being the link to the family of Joseph the husband of Mary.

The story of Rahab is recorded in Joshua 2–6, as part of the account of the destruction of Jericho. Rahab seems to be a well-known Canaanite businesswoman, who provides lodging and is identified as a harlot. Providing lodging was a sideline of

[7] In his humorously titled chapter "Why Bring on the Ladies," Brown agrees that these women deserve special attention because their presence breaks the formulaic genealogy, citing St. Jerome, Martin Luther, and others. Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Image Books, 1979), 71–74.

[8] Evdokimov discusses Eve as the mother of all living, suggesting that our biological conformity reflects our spiritual conformity to eternal life. Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 155.

prostitution—the only business a woman could operate. This is evidently the way Rahab supports her large family. Prominent clientele, including the King of Jericho, seem to know her, and spies working on behalf of Joshua and his army also turn up at her door. When agents of the King come to Rahab for information about the Hebrews, whom they suspect have infiltrated the city, she hides Joshua's agents on her roof and denies knowing their specific whereabouts. The soldiers of Jericho must be familiar with Rahab already, because they accept her word and go on to pursue the spies elsewhere.

Caught between her own people and the Hebrew spies, Rahab faces a tough choice. What is remarkable is that, despite coming from a polytheistic and idol-worshipping Canaanite culture, she discerns the reality of the God of Israel. Aware of the story of the Exodus, she professes her faith, saying, "The Lord your God is He who is God in heaven above and on earth below." This is a striking statement coming from a woman of Jericho, an enemy of the Israelites caught in an extremely dangerous situation. Why should she be believed? Surprisingly, the Hebrew spies promise to "deal kindly and faithfully" with Rahab and her family. The sign of their promise to spare her is a scarlet cord, to be hung from Rahab's window—a bloodless reminder of the Hebrews' sacrifice before Passover. Still: what must it have been like for Rahab once the city walls started to fall, trapped inside and surrounded by sounds of death and destruction? Nevertheless, out of all the inhabitants of Jericho, Rahab and her family alone are saved, and subsequently join the community of Israel (Josh. 6:25). Rahab is eventually joined to Salmon, a Hebrew man, and becomes the mother of Boaz (1 Chron. 2:11). Through her initiative and her courage, she is a recipient of divine compassion, known as one whose faith saved her from perishing (Heb. 11:31).

Meeting of Ruth and Boaz. Marc Chagall, 1960.

Through Boaz, Rahab's story intersects with that of Ruth, the third woman in the genealogy and a great lady, said to have been of greater worth than seven sons. Ruth is a Moabite, however, and her people were despised by the Hebrews because they descended from Moab, the unfortunate offspring of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter. When a severe famine threatens the Israelites' survival, some relocate to the land of Moab and intermarry. Among the immigrants are Naomi, Elimelech, and their two sons—the latter of whom marry two Moabite sisters, Ruth and Orpah. Within ten years, however, all three women are widowed and without support. Bereft of means, Naomi

decides to leave Moab and return to her people, advising her daughters-in-law to remain. Ruth, who is devoted to her mother-in-law, resists her advice. Showing extraordinary resolve, Ruth begs Naomi, "Entreat me not to leave you … . Where you go, I will go … . your people shall be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

At around harvest time, they return together to Bethlehem, where an indigent Naomi hopes to find support with her husband's family. Ruth offers to go to the fields to glean the bits of grain left behind by the harvesters. Every day, the courageous Ruth—a beggar, a foreign outcast from Moab, and a prime target for assault—works hard in the hot, dry, dusty fields, hoping to collect enough grain to feed Naomi and herself. After some time, the reapers come to the field of Boaz, and Ruth follows. Boaz is a wealthy man and a relative of Naomi's husband. Ruth, who is reported to have been working nonstop from early morning, is soon noticed by Boaz as she follows after the reapers. Addressing her, he instructs her to glean in his fields only, guarantees her water to drink, and promises that she will not be molested. Ruth, aware of her inferior status, is overwhelmed by this kindness. Then, even more surprising, Boaz invites Ruth to lunch and makes sure that she has access to an ample supply of grain before she leaves.

David and Bathsheba.
Marc Chagall, 1956

When the harvest is complete, Naomi strategizes with Ruth to get the attention of Boaz once again. Like Tamar, Naomi seizes on the Levirate law to justify enticing Boaz into marrying Ruth. Even though Ruth is tied to her dead father-in-law's property, it is nevertheless a high-risk move for a Moabite widow to presume having a relationship with a prominent Israelite. With what must have taken great courage, Ruth—under the guidance of Naomi—prepares to entice Boaz. While Boaz is celebrating the harvest, Ruth waits to lie beside him on the threshing floor. When Boaz awakens, he is surprised to find Ruth at his feet, but Ruth boldly asks him to spread his cloak over her indicating a sign of intimacy. Boaz does not turn from her but asks her to stay and promises to do all that she asks. In the end, Boaz honors the Levirate law and makes Ruth his wife. They have a son, Obed, who is the grandfather of King David.

The final relationship referenced in the genealogy is between David and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Their affair (described in 2 Sam. 11–12) is more troubling than the other stories, yet confirms that the unexpected—and in this case sinful—behavior of men and women can be used by God to further his divine plan. Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, although a Hittite, is highly placed in King David's army. When David sees Bath-

sheba bathing on her roof, he desires her and sends for her.[9] We do not know whether she is intentionally seeking his attention or is unaware of him, but either way, going to the king places her in a high-risk situation. By complying with the king's wishes, she finds herself pregnant with his child. In a panic, David tries to cover his tracks by bringing her husband back from the war, hoping that he will sleep with his wife so that the paternity of the child will not be questioned. Uriah, however, does not go to his wife, refusing to spend time with her while his men are engaged in battle. Probably enraged by Uriah's steadfastness, David issues orders that ensure Bathsheba's husband will be killed on the front lines.

Young and pregnant by the king, Bathsheba learns that her husband has been killed. We know that she mourns her loss, but is then brought to David to become his seventh wife and another member of his harem. Married to the king, Bathsheba has his son, but suffers another loss when the son dies in infancy. Even if Bathsheba as she is popularly portrayed sought the king's attention to satisfy her ambitions, the death of a husband and a son must have brought deep pain and suffering. Bathsheba and David subsequently have another son, Solomon, who, amid palace intrigue, succeeds David as king and becomes another link in Christ's genealogy.

IV

If there is anything we can say about these four women, it is that their stories confirm that the Bible presents surprising, complex, and even conflicting illustrations of male – female relationships. And if there is anything more we can say about male – female relationships today, it is that all relationships bring with them great risks and no guarantees—but also that, in spite of ourselves, our many flaws and sins, we are recipients of divine compassion.

In their own distinctive ways, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba display the courage needed to face the unexpected and ultimately to be recipients and agents of divine compassion. Who would think of them as saving us?—and yet their vulnerability enabled them to do just that. They are worthy precursors of the young girl, Mary, who took an incredible risk when she said yes and exhibited extraordinary courage in opening herself to being the mother of God. Through God's infinite wisdom and grace, we are ultimately given the opportunity to open ourselves to others, so that we might know healing through her Son, whose divine compassion is reflected on the Cross, which is where we find our deepest search for truth and the very voice of being. ✠

[9] Bathsheba's story recalls that of Susannah, another Old Testament figure who is desired by a man other than her husband and faces danger in trying to resist his advances. She has no credibility alongside the word of a man: resisting and complying could both result in a death sentence.

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