

## **Sermon: Tough Blessings**

Year C, Lent 5

[Joshua 5:9-12](#); [Psalm 32](#); [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#); [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

Offered March 13, 2016 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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What Tamar saw in him, I'll never know. But once Tamar had her mind made up, well, it was clear the rest of us could look elsewhere. So I did and found my Rachel. And somewhere in the next five years, we all ended up with two boys apiece. It was going well for us, not great, but we were holding our own. What with the Romans and all, that's all a family can really hope for – one more year on the land.

So when Tamar died, well, it was like something broke in that family. Simeon's eyes just went dark. When the boys, young men really, fought, they didn't know how to stop. Tamar had always found a way for someone to back down without feeling foolish, so they had never quite gotten the hang of it. Simeon kept working, harder than ever really. So did his eldest boy, Joseph. And Matthias, the younger son, did too, although he was always turned towards the hills, listening for gossip, walking with strangers as they passed on the road outside the village. That boy was a charmer, with girls trailing him like evening shadows.

A couple of years after Tamar died, Simeon was coming back to himself. Not like when Tamar was alive, but Simeon lost that brittle look of too much work and not enough sleep. I can remember that I wasn't all hunched up inside, afraid I'd say something wrong and set him off. So Simeon was coming back, the boys were grown men, not married yet, but that was on the horizon. That's when it happened.

Matthias, the younger one, asked his father for his inheritance. I see Simeon the next day and he's as grey and stiff and miserable as he had ever been before. I ask Simeon what's wrong and he tells me. Knowing how broken and sad his father has been for months, Matthias has the face to ask his father for his inheritance right then. Simeon just keeps saying, "I can't lose him too. I just can't lose him too."

So Simeon gives in. For some crazy reason, he agrees. Tamar had brought a sweet strip of land with her when she married. Nothing great, being so small. Simeon would go sit there most evenings, to watch the night come up in the sky, his back to the sunset. So that's what Simeon gives Matthias. And he gives Joseph the rest of it. Right then.

Now, I know my friend. I know he thought it would end there. But no, if Matthias is going crazy, he's going to do it right. He sells Tamar's strip of land to someone from the city. Matthias takes his money and heads for the horizon he loves so much. Dead to his father, he goes to live among strangers in some far away land.

Oh, we hear reports, initially. Like most of the country boys that go to the city, he's on a spree. Then nothing for a while. There was some crazy rumors about keeping pigs, but that was just stupid. He's lost his mind, but he was raised right. We haven't heard anything for a long while, so I imagine he'd moved on. Famine down that way. So long as it stays away from here.

Months go by. No one speaks about Matthias, how he sold land out from under his father. His father was entitled to be supported on that land while he lived. The rest of the village is pretty cautious around Simeon and Joseph too. There's something wrong with a family doesn't fight

tooth and nail to keep the land. They'll never get Tamar's land back, even when the city folks finally give up.

Which brings me to yesterday, a day the entire village will remember long after Simeon and I are resting with our ancestors. I've come down to the house for lunch with Simeon. We're outside my house, Rachel's just stepping out to greet us, when Simeon, looking over her shoulder, suddenly stiffens. The path to the village from the road winds up from down there, but at midday there isn't much stirring.

Now Simeon and I, we work hard. And regardless of how foolish our sons may be, we have a certain dignity to maintain. We walk where we need to go. We wouldn't run if the building we were in caught fire. So in the midday sun, with the whole village looking on, Simeon takes off running. And not a sort of shuffling quick step. He had hiked up his robe, racing and whooping, hurling himself to the edge of the village. There he grabs a skinny, barefoot, good for nothing by the shoulders, then cups his face, then kisses him again and again, tenderly, before turning back to the village with his arm around him.

"It's Matthias." Rachel whispers. I am so stunned that Simeon can still run I just stand there. Then I'm stunned Matthias had the brass to come back. Then I'm stunned that Simeon kissed him. The whole village is out now, standing there, silent. Whispering hisses begin around the edges. Matthias straightens. In a clear carrying voice, as his father grips his hands, he says, "Father, I have sinned against God and you. I am no longer worthy to be your son."

Well, that's true. Quite a change in Matthias. He's filthy, of course, but somehow settled into his bones. Square on the ground, instead of half lurching towards the hills. Lean now, with not a spare ounce on him. And Simeon. The madman who dashed down the path is gone. His face is at peace. He looks only at his son's face for another moment. He too is settled back into his bones, back onto the land. He calls his servant to fetch a robe and a ring and sandals. He hasn't used that tone of command since Tamar died. He orders the calf he's been fattening roasted, so everyone can come to his house and share his joy at Matthias' return.

He looks at me, then everyone is looking at me. The village has been out of kilter since Matthias started this adventure. And to be honest, Simeon and Joseph didn't do much to calm anyone down. They couldn't, not really, since they were too broken up. But it puts a village on edge. Makes us all a bit twitchy. So everyone's looking at me. Maybe it wouldn't have been too much to ask, but I couldn't just welcome Matthias. Not after he had all but killed Simeon. But I could put my hand on Simeon's shoulder and turn toward his house. That was enough for Simeon. My Rachel said in a loud voice about getting the servant girls to get the ovens heated up for the calf, maybe making some bread to go with it. So before we had really gone two paces, the party had begun.

What happened next is partly my fault. I was so happy to see my old friend Simeon back to himself, almost glowing, the way they said Moses was after his time on Sinai. Reconciling with Matthias would take some time, but he was finally on the right track. The edginess, the out of whack feeling, was gone from the village.

I was sitting with Simeon, but I could see out the courtyard door to the street beyond, where all the idle boys cluster when there's a party. There was a commotion, then I caught a glimpse of Joseph's face as he stood outside, clearly not coming in.

Most will say he was angry, even enraged, because he was, but I've known that face, man and boy. He was angry, true. And exhausted, from worry about his father. But he was betrayed too. I had a part of that. Simeon's joy had filled him to such an extent, he could think of little else but looking at Matthias. I should have sent for Joseph, or even gone to him myself. If his mother had still been there, it would have been different. Joseph would not have been left up there in the fields. She would have gone to fetch him home herself, if need be.

I saw Simeon's face too, when he saw Joseph. Confused at first, probably about why Joseph was hanging back. If it had been me, with my temper, there probably would have been shouting and blows and a son lost on the same day a son was found. Maybe Simeon's broken time gave him some idea of what to do. In any event, he got up. When I started to rise, he motioned me back. I don't know if he wanted me to make sure no one would try to shame Matthias or if he didn't want Joseph to feel ganged up on.

I can accurately recount what Joseph said. Given how Joseph was shouting, I imagine even the emperor on his fine seat in Rome heard Joseph. Joseph was wrong in what he said, or mostly. Joseph had worked hard all his life, but no harder than anyone else. He was the oldest, he would have eventually inherited most of the land, if they managed to hold onto it. It takes hard work to hold what you have in this day and age. Trying to shame his brother with that made up prostitute thing, well that just reflected back on him. We all knew the gossip; there had been not a word about such goings on.

Simeon's voice was low, so I couldn't hear what he said to his son, but I could see he was entreating him, arm around Joseph, gestures gentle.

"Joseph doesn't get it, yet." I was so surprised I actually jumped as I turned to Matthias. He spoke so quietly. "No matter what I do for the rest of my life, my father and brother will know I broke from them. They will always have this time together when I was away. A broken pot is always weaker than one that remained whole."

Matthias filled my cup, then took a sip of water and a bite of bread, closing his eyes as he savored it. "The land is Joseph's. It will always be Joseph's. I will live on sufferance for the rest of my life and my children will have no claim on the land when I am dead. When Father divided the property before I left, he actually did Joseph a favor and protected him from my madness. When Father dies, Joseph will have every right to throw me out of this house and no one in the village will take me in." Matthias turned from gazing at his father and brother still out on the road to look me square in the eyes.

"This party isn't for me, or at least not much. Father is trying to get the village to take me back as his son, even though we all know one feast can't do that. You know me as well as anyone and you're here for Father; you're still making up your mind about me. I hoped to work as a hired hand. I even wondered if *you* would even let me do that, once Father turned me away. This feast is mostly because Father is so joyful that I've come back to myself, to my senses, to my people and that I managed to live long enough to return to him. At the moment, Father could care less why I've come home, all I had to do was return.

"My brother, he loves order and rules. He's a good first son, he does what everyone expects of him and he does it really well. But Father's joy is as much a threat to him as it is a balm to me. Everything in Joseph's world just fell apart. He's angry at me and yelling at Father, but mostly he's scared that all the rules are gone forever."

“I know better than Joseph what I was looking at. I had one future and it was death. I have done nothing to merit Father’s acceptance of my return, but he has literally given me a chance to live because no one makes it alone. Father is trying to find a place for me again in this village and with my brother. I thought I had to earn that, but it’s really just a gift that my father is giving me. Joseph thinks he has to earn that too, by staying inside his rules and doing what’s expected of him. Joseph doesn’t realize that the rules and the expectations just make being together easier. In the end, Father’s out there, under the eyes of the whole village, not smacking my brother, because he’s trying to get Joseph to understand that Joseph couldn’t earn his place in the village either; it’s just a gift.”

Matthias smiled for the first time, just a little gust of pleasure, that made me think of the boy he had been. “Once he does figure that out, he’s just going to get mad all over again. Because it’s easy for me to accept my father’s gift. I was barefoot and starving. I will accept with real gratitude any kind of welcome this village and my father offer. My brother will have a much tougher time, because he thinks he doesn’t need the gift or doesn’t need it as much or that all his following of the rules means he doesn’t have to accept it at all. Yet another time when I have it easier than him. Mother always said many blessings are harder to take than most curses.”

Well, there it was. Tamar was right. Simeon has been a tough blessing as a friend and probably as a husband and father. Matthias and Simeon have laid a tough blessing on this village. Simeon was still out in the road, with his arm around his rigid, silent elder boy, not paying the slightest attention to anyone else. So this I could do for Tamar and Matthias and myself. I laid my hand on his head to bless him in front of the whole village. God knows we all need each other to get through this world’s tough blessings.