

“Former Relationships: Designer Luggage”

Excerpts from Luke 3:23-38 (The ancestors of Jesus are named.)

Excerpts from Matthew 1:1-16 (The genealogy of Jesus is presented.)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler

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I can name my grandparents, at least their first and last names. I confess I cannot go back any further than them without inquiring of my cousins or doing genealogical research.

I appreciate those of you who have put in a good deal of time working on your genealogies. It’s meaningful, and sometimes useful, to have an accurate historical account of your family . . . even though it’s tough to be completely accurate. . .

[Karen or John start walking down center aisle loaded with “designer vintage luggage.”] Why, hello. May we help you?

[Karen or John (with mics): **We’re just coming to worship. Sorry, we’re a little late.**]

It looks like you’re headed somewhere on a trip.

[Karen or John: **Why do you say that?**]

Well, you have quite a number of suitcases there.

[Karen or John: **Oh, these aren’t for a trip. We carry these wherever we go.**]

Wherever you go?

[Karen or John: **Yes, I guess, when you consider relationships, we carry around a lot of baggage.**]

Oh, I see.

[They have difficulty getting situated in their pew. Karen or John: **May we place these up here—there seems to be room here, by the communion table?** They leave their entire luggage at the communion table then sit down, sort of crowding people in some pew.]

Certainly. There’s room for many things by the communion table.

Now, where was I? I was saying it is difficult for us even in 2011 to gain a completely accurate genealogy.

You can imagine how difficult it would have been to get an accurate history in ancient days—days when history was mostly oral history, hardly anything was written down.

But, then, **genealogies** had a **different purpose 2-3,000 years ago**. The goal was not accuracy of names, but, you might say, **clarity of context**.

I’m sure you have memorized and read often those interesting passages from Scripture that Paul and Sue read today. They are such helpful passages as devotions to gain strength and courage. No? You haven’t read those passages very often? You didn’t even realize they existed, even though the Matthew passage is **the very beginning of the entire New Testament?** Well, you’re not alone! These passages seem booooooring . . . at first glance, and even at second glance. However, they are not entirely boring when we know a little about genealogies of ancient days.

First, let’s compare Matthew and Luke’s genealogies. Listing them side by side, we find they do not match up. Both lists name Joseph as Jesus’ father, but they disagree

immediately--they do not name the same person as Joseph's father. **Matthew is interested in proving that Jesus has a history of royalty, so he traces the line of Jesus from David through Solomon, that is, through Kings. Luke traces the line through David's son Nathan, resulting in a non-royal line.**¹

Today, we search for "accuracy of names." That was NOT the point of genealogies back then. There are 25 genealogies in the Old Testament--genealogies of different people. You know these passages; they read, "This person begat that person." The purpose of those in the Hebrew Bible and these two genealogies of Jesus in the New Testament was to set the particular **story being told in the context of the big religious story of the people. Matthew and Luke had religious reasons for naming the people they named as Jesus' ancestors.**²

Luke wanted his readers to be sure theologically that Jesus was the son of God, so he tried to show it, genealogically.

Matthew wanted his readers to *get* that Jesus was for **non-Jews** as well as Jews, so he includes several non-Jews in his genealogy...all of whom, fascinatingly, are **women.**³

These lists served a social function. In today's language, you might say the genealogies put the "baggage" that people carried around with them *up there by the communion table!* The leftover expectations from previous generations, the hopes and unfinished business of their ancestors, were present for each new generation "X" "Y" or "Z." Recall that the hymn that we sing at Christmas time, "Little Town of Bethlehem," includes the phrase, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." The "hopes and fears of all the years"—*that* was Jesus' baggage that he carried from birth.

Three years ago I had the privilege of officiating at the marriage ceremony of a couple who, in their 50's, had each experienced the death of a spouse. The groom had been married a long time to one woman. He had no children, no siblings, and no pets. The bride had four children, seven grandchildren, various other family members, two cats and a dog. She once said to her fiancé, apologetically, that she carried a lot of "baggage" with her into their marriage.

A long-term friend of the bride challenged her, "**Don't call it 'baggage.' Call it 'Designer Luggage.'**"

"Designer Luggage."

This bride had put much care and energy into all those relationships that she still had, as she entered into this marriage. All those people—and animals—had affected her deeply. The giving, receiving, working through crises, enjoying celebrations and milestones with her "Peeps" had enriched the bride's life. She didn't need to apologize for all that. It was not, is not, "baggage"—but "Designer Luggage"—*that is* what she brought to her new relationship!

You could say that Matthew and Luke, in writing their genealogies of Jesus, wanted people to realize that Jesus brought to *his* contemporary world **high-end** "Designer Luggage." In the very beginning of the New Testament the people were being told that Jesus was a bridge...a bridge over any troubled water of the past...a bridge that *they really wanted to become an avenue toward the fulfillment of all their hopes.*

Sometimes we feel as if we must not mention past relationships, especially when we enter into a new relationship. **However, "no matter where we go, we take a little of each other everywhere."**⁴ We cannot be un-influenced by a doting father, a mother with

high expectations, a twin sister who looks just like us, a playful brother, an alcoholic aunt, a violent grandparent, or an independent “X.” Our loves, disappointments, expectations and hopes hang on us, hover over us, and enter into us. They lift us up and tug on our shoulders.

In a sense, *we* are living embodiments of fluid genealogies...with all the secrets, myths, complexities, foibles, honors, and praises that go with all that.

In addition to the wise and foolish “baggage” we carry from our relatives, we also carry with us the influence of major figures of human history. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., one of these people who have transformed history, is, in a sense, “designer luggage” for **all** of us. King himself pointed out that, “Whatever a person is or possesses, he owes to others who have preceded him.” One of the ways King *named* his vision was the concept of the “Beloved Community.”⁵ King’s vision was that the whole society would **be** a community of love and justice—he thought of this as the ideal expression of the Christian faith, and that it could actually happen.

He used a creative metaphor for how we are related: “Whether we realize it or not, each of us lives eternally ‘in the red.’” He explained that we are indebted to past generations, and that should lead us to realize that we are not self-sufficient. Instead, it should help us to realize that we can only grow as individuals through meaningful relationships with others. The “I” cannot attain fulfillment without the “Thou.”

Jesus seemed to carry his luggage well—allowing people’s past expectations and their huge hopes for him to influence, but not determine or limit, what he would do. He did not seem burdened, in his ministry or in his teaching, with all the projections upon him—he went about doing what he himself felt led to do. However, it is interesting that when authorities, for example, became angry with Jesus, they seemed to be angry because of what they imagined about him, not at what he really was.

That may also be true for us.

We can take our entire designer luggage and **accept with grace** the teaching and blessings that all those former relationships provide us. We can also try to **sift through** the weight and junk those former relationships left us, **leaving behind what we can and laughing at what we’re stuck with**. As we accept with grace the blessings and walk on with some humor about what’s a bit of a burden, then we become stronger people. We become stronger people who have creative and powerful histories, yet who also come to each current moment—free of the past.

There is never a reason to be ashamed of our “baggage,” for we can carry past relationships with grace, letting the past sit gently where it lay. The past can inform us wisely what not to do again or what to repeat. As we **transform** our not-too-much-to-be-proud-of relatives and not-too-proud personal moments **into wisdom, then the tag of their influence changes from “baggage” to “designer luggage”...and we are ready to travel forward.**

Jeanne Moreau, a French singer, uses a different metaphor than suitcases, vintage or not, to reflect upon former relationships. She sings, “I’m not like *marble*; to the *ground* I’m *attached*, like the roots of a tree. **Will you accept my past?**” She’s singing that she’s attached, with roots in the earth. . . She has lived and grown and offers not a detachable stone to others, but rather a living-learning-breathing-connected self to those in the present moment.

Our two guests here today—the two who came in a bit late—carry their baggage, oops, designer luggage, quite visibly with them—wherever they go. That’s unique. We all have former relationships that we carry around, but most of us carry our luggage less visibly. Having compassion for others, also for ourselves, includes a nod of acceptance to those previous folk who literally created us. Compassion for them includes a thank you of sorts for all their influence, for they have helped to make us who we are today.

Each of us can set our designer luggage at the communion table as we strive to be who we are led to be in our current relationships and as we go forward discovering who we will become.

¹ Ram or Aram is the only name to appear for a span of approximately 400 years.

² All my comments here are from The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. Matthew and Luke

³ Tamar was the Canaanite wife of Judah’s son, whom Judah declares to be righteous. Rahab was also a Gentile, non-Jewish. Ruth too was a Gentile from Moab.

⁴ Tim McGraw

⁵ Article by Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr.