

Fourth Sunday of Advent 2016
St. Mary's Catholic Church
Fr. Michael Renninger

The name of the book was: "How to Speak Southern: A Linguistic Guide for Yankees and other Foreigners." The book explains how to pronounce English with an accent that is appropriate for South of the Mason Dixon line.

A parishioner gave this book to me at Christmas of 1990. I think they could tell that I needed help in my geographical transition. I had grown up in south eastern Pennsylvania. My dad's parents spoke Pennsylvania Dutch as a first language.

That's where I grew up, and went to school, and fell in love with the Lord.

But in 1990, that same Lord led me from Pennsylvania to a new world of spoonbread, Smithfield ham, and children who attend something called 'cotillion.'

I felt like Dorothy stepping out of the black and white, in to the colorful land of Virginia.

Central Virginia's accent on English continues to delight me.

For instance, those who grew up near Richmond never pronounce the letter "r" at the end of a word.

One woman explained: "Why, it's very easy to know if you grew up around here. If your mother and your sister spent the summah at the river, then you are probably from Richmond."

Richmonders have a unique accent. And Richmonders have a love for history too. Consequently, Richmonders are attentive to a person's *family* history.

I once attended a wedding reception at the Jefferson Hotel. Strategically, I was positioned near the crab cake station...

Nearby, an elegant Richmond grandmother was being introduced to one of the bridesmaids, who herself had recently been married.

After the initial introductions, the grandmother looked at the younger woman and said, "Now tell me – who were you before you were married?"

The bridesmaid did not quite understand, so the grandmother gently clarified: "before you were married, *who were you?*"

Still no response from the bridesmaid. I ate another crab cake...

Finally, the elderly Richmond woman said with great sweetness, “Why darlin’, *who are your people?*”

And thus did she reveal her approach to life, and family! This older Richmond woman was convinced that if she knew the young woman’s family tree, if she knew ‘her people,’ she would know all she needed to know about the person she had just met.

In the biblical world, the same assumption is at work. The assumption was clear – if we know the kind of people who are your ancestors, then we will have a very good idea of what kind of person YOU will be, and what we should expect from you.

The Gospel of Matthew speaks with a unique accent. Today, we focus on the very first Chapter as Matthew introduces Jesus Christ to the world.

For years I struggled with the question: why would Matthew start his Gospel and his Christmas story with a long list of hard-to-pronounce names? Why is he introducing Jesus by talking about Abraham, and David and Shealtiel and Tamar and Bathsheba? Why?

But the revelation came at the Jefferson Hotel, near the crab cakes.

In a sense, Matthew begins his Gospel with a profound question: “*Now Jesus, who are your people?*”

Remember, the assumption is this: if I know what kind of people are in your family tree, then I can predict what kind of person YOU will be!

So, you *might* think that Matthew would give us a family tree of Jesus that is full heroes. But Matthew gives us a list of sinners and scandals.

Now Jesus, who are your people? Well, according to Matthew, there *are* some ‘great names’ on this list. Matthew tells us that Jesus’ family tree starts with Abraham. Abraham was a righteous man, right? He was the father of Isaac. These are heroes of Israel.

Later in the list is King David... someone so wonderful that Michelangelo carved him with 0% body fat. David, the model king for all of Israel!

But this ‘model king’ also committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed. Imagine that - a politician with questionable morals?!?!

Now Jesus, who are your people? Yes, there were *some* decent kings and leaders.

But Matthew mentions *other* kings of Israel. Many of them were completely unfaithful to God. Most of them were inept failures.

Who else in the family tree of Jesus? Occasionally Matthew includes a woman's name. Four of the women mentioned by Matthew were either foreigners or connected to foreigners – in other words, 'strangers and aliens.'

And, in one way or another, the women mentioned by Matthew all experience what we might call 'unusual intimate situations' which brought them under a cloud of moral suspicion.

Bathsheba committed adultery with David. Tamar became pregnant by her father in law. Rahab is a prostitute.

And the Virgin Mary is pregnant before she starts living with Joseph.

Adultery! Lust! Immorality! There is enough here to fill of full season of "Real Housewives of Jerusalem."

What an odd way to introduce the savior of the world!

Imagine if the elderly lady at the Jefferson Hotel had asked, "Now who are Jesus' people?"

Matthew's answer might offend her sensibilities - because 'Jesus' people,' the family tree of our savior, consists of sinful kings, questionable foreigners, and a group of women under a cloud of moral suspicion.

Who are his people? Adulterers, liars, murderers. In other words, SINNERS. All the *wrong kind of people.*

Why in the world would Matthew start his Gospel with such a messy family tree for Jesus? Because Matthew is telling us that *every sinner* is part of Jesus' family. You and I... we're all part of the family.

As God prepared to send his son into the world, the Lord did NOT wait until he found a perfect family, a family full of the 'right kind of people.'

Rather, the Lord chose the messy, sinful, scandalous family that ran from Abraham through David to Bathsheba to Joseph and Mary, and God said, "THERE. RIGHT THERE. I am going to take flesh in the company of sinners, in an imperfect family, in the middle of the mess."

What joyous Christmas news! Jesus is very patient with the imperfect. He is comfortable with sinners. After all, his family tree is full of them.

And Jesus will spend the rest of the Gospel of Matthew loving and saving all of the wrong kind of people.

Sometimes, we think that we have to become the ‘right kind of people,’ and *then* Christ will come into our lives with mercy and healing.

But, the genealogy of Matthew tells us that Jesus is already in your life, and my life, and in everyone’s life.

Do you have an imperfect family? Rejoice! So did Jesus! Do you see a lot of mess in the world? Rejoice! So did Jesus!

And where is Christ today? He is right in the middle of our mess. Where should we look for him? In the middle of the messiest part of my life, that aspect of me that seems most out of control.

Don’t just look for Jesus in the orderly places of your life. Look for him in the messiest part of you. You will find that he has been there for a very long time, offering peace, and hope, and forgiveness.

The Jesus who was born into a messy family tree ‘back then,’ is the Jesus who invites all messy sinners today to gather in the family of believers.

We know that we are all sinners, upon whom God has looked with mercy.

And from that experience of mercy, we have the opportunity to share Christ’s mercy to everyone who needs it.

Right now, too many people are being told that they are the ‘wrong kind of people.’ But we who read the genealogy of Matthew know that, in God’s sight, the ‘wrong kind of people’ are precisely the *right* kind of people to be gathered together into the Body of Christ.

Who are your people, Jesus? We are. Every one of us. Teach us to recognize your presence in our imperfect neighbors. And help us to find the gift of your presence in our sinful selves, where we need your peace and your promise the most.