

OUR FAMILY TREE

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

1 John 3:1-7

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Over the years I've come to know people who have invested numerous hours into researching their descendants and creating an extensive family tree. They have gone to courthouses to access birth certificates, wedding licenses, death certificates, and deeds to property. They have gone to cemeteries to look at records, libraries to look at old newspapers, community historical societies to see what information they have, and churches to look at old baptismal and membership records. Of course these days, the internet and sites like ancestry.com have made researching the different branches of our family tree much easier.

So, what do you know about your ancestors? Most of us know at least a bit about the past two or three generations, but what about ten or twenty or more generations ago? The farther back one goes, it's not only harder to find information, but the task can become overwhelming because of the increasing number of descendants. Sure, you know you have two parents and four grand-parents, but as you go back in time the numbers grow quickly: eight great-grandparents, 16 great-great-grandparents, 32 great-great-great-grandparents, and that doesn't even include aunts, uncles and cousins. If you go back about 40 generations, or about a thousand years, each of us has, theoretically, more than a trillion ancestors.

A Yale statistician by the name of Joseph Chang has done a lot of genealogical research, and he believes his research links every person of European descent to Charlemagne, also known as Charles the Great. He was the great King of the Franks and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire who lived from 742-814AD. During his years of reign, he not only spread commerce and education, he had a significant impact on the spread of Christianity. Now, I don't know about you, but I know that I have European ancestors, so I guess that means I likely have royalty in my blood. Perhaps you do as well.

If you have spent time reading the Bible, you know that there are genealogy lists in books such as Genesis, as well as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Those genealogy verses are often the ones we quickly skim or totally skip because a lot of those names are not easy to pronounce. Just for the fun of it, I thought about including one of those genealogy lists as the morning Scripture lesson for the liturgist to read, but then I thought that Larry/Dan might not ever volunteer to be a liturgist again, and so I decided against it. But suffice it to say that the family tree is important to the Biblical story of faith.

In our Epistle lesson, there is no list of names, but John emphasizes in his own way the importance of knowing our heritage and taking our place on the family tree. He begins chapter 3 by using the common Biblical phrase – "children of God" – to describe the faithful. As children of God, the most important thing to know is that our lineage is traced back to Jesus Christ, and then to God the Father. As children of God our family tree is made up of those "who have been born of God." (v. 9) To be born of God is to be born "not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).

To be children of God is to share spiritual genes and to have things in common. Jesus encouraged this understanding of a common lineage as he taught all of us to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven..." There is a saying that goes, "You can't choose

your parents.” I’ve heard that saying recently on a commercial in which a daughter is greatly embarrassed by her mother. But that saying is also true for all who are numbered among the family of God. After all, we have not chosen God, but God has chosen us. We did not first call God “Father” instead, God first called us his children. We have not earned a spot in this family by our noble thoughts, exceptional behavior, stunning personality or good looks, but by one thing, and one thing only: the steadfast, generous love of God the Father (v. 1). Because we are children of God it is as though “God carries our picture in his wallet” (Tony Campolo).

It wasn’t that many years ago that I carried pictures in my wallet, of course, now I carry a smart phone. But when I carried actual pictures, I typically had pictures of my children at different stages of their lives. I always loved their baby and toddler pictures, but I always had their more recent pictures as well, pictures that reflected the fact that they were growing and changing. As parents, we know how important it is that our children learn and grow, develop and mature, and this is no less true for children of God. “What we will be has not yet been revealed...,” but John tells us that when our growth is finished we will look a lot like Jesus (1 John 3:2). This growing follows our initial commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior. It is what we often refer to as sanctification – our life-long journey of becoming more like Christ.

We become more like Christ as we embrace the family characteristics of love and grace. We become more like Jesus by engaging in prayer and allowing God’s Word to inform more and more of our life as we read and study it. We become more like Christ as we live and share the gospel, as we speak the truth, serve the poor, heal the sick and bind up the brokenhearted. We become more like Jesus as we choose to walk the self-denying, cross-carrying path of discipleship and follow his example of eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, loving enemies and turning the other cheek. To swim in Jesus’ gene pool means opening ourselves further to the movement of the Holy Spirit, allowing ourselves to be changed from the inside out, and becoming effective channels of God’s love and power. All of this needs to happen on an individual level, but it must also happen within and among the community of faith if the church is going to be the church of Jesus Christ in every generation.

As children of God it is in our spiritual genes to grow and change and mature for the purpose of revealing God’s Kingdom in our time and place. For example, in the 1930’s and 40’s, the church of the Holy Trinity provided food and shelter for the unemployed victims of the depression and for servicemen returning from war. At the same time, that church was also right in the midst of addressing the issues of affordable housing and the racist treatment of Japanese Americans. In the 60’s and 70’s pews were actually unbolted from the floor and removed for creative use of space – guitars, piano and congregational singers replaced organ music and what had been a paid choir. Today, the congregation is still growing and changing with ministries that include hospice care and a refugee placement and care committee. To believe in Jesus is to embrace the power of transformation for every generation.

Our passage from 1 John also emphasizes that God is pure (vs. 3) and God is righteous (vs. 7). Because we are children of God we are to also be pure and righteous. It’s not hard to see that the presence of sin contaminates and creates impurity, and this impurity defines all of us, but as children of a righteous Heavenly Father we are not to be content with this reality. To claim our spiritual genes is to strive for that which is good and right. To claim our spiritual genes is to let go of actions and attitudes that may feel very comfortable, but are clearly inappropriate for children of God.

We can certainly give in and accept that being pure and righteous, loving and gracious is unrealistic or we can acknowledge the fact that we are not only created from very good genetic material, we are blessed by the excellence of God's divine parenting. "For it is God who is at work in you," according to Paul, "enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Phil. 2:13) Allowing God to work within us is the power behind any and all spiritual success, and this is also the focus of the six-week fall study, Renovate: Building a life with God. I hope many of you will participate in the study either by attending it or reading the book on your own. God working within us is how we can prepare ourselves to hear and then embrace the Healthy Church Initiative report that will be presented at the end of October.

When God's presence and power are at work in and through our lives we are then able to claim our spiritual heritage and grow into the spiritually mature image that is Christ. Like mothers and fathers who conceive and nurture and support their children, God's desire is to mold us into the unique and spirit-filled people we are meant to be. The initiative is always God's, our example is always Christ, but the response is always ours.

As children of God, we rejoice this day in our family tree. Charlemagne can keep his crown, because we are children of a much greater king. We share the spiritual genes of God's Son, and we are related to Paul and John and every other follower of Christ who has ever lived. As we take into ourselves Christ's broken body and poured out blood, we are invited to embrace the family characteristics of love and grace, purity and righteousness.

On this World Communion Sunday, we celebrate our expansive spiritual genealogy. Because we practice open communion in the United Methodist Church, all are invited to participate in Holy Communion. Let us each embrace our eternally rich lineage as children of God as we prepare our hearts to receive all that God would give us this day...