

Epiphany 2B, January 14, 2018, John 1:43-51, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Just out of curiosity, how many of you here this morning have done genealogical research on your family origins? That's a good number of you. Now, how many of you have used one of the several DNA tests to see what your family's ethnic and cultural background is? Not as many, but a few of you. A DNA test must have been a popular gift to give at Christmas this year, because it seems like just about every third commercial had someone dressed in lederhosen thinking they were German and then trading them in for a kilt because they discovered they were more Scottish than German. I've talked to a number of people who have taken the test and were surprised by the results. Some of the results were known, but when you discover that somewhere deep in your past there were relatives who lived in a place you never even heard of, it's kind of exciting. I haven't quite made up my mind yet. There's something about giving over my DNA that sits in a big database somewhere that congers up too many episodes of the X-Files or some other dystopian science fiction future in which your worth as a human being is determined by your genetic make-up. You didn't know your pastor has a hidden streak of conspiracy theorist in him, did you?

Many of us want to know where we came from. Mostly because we came from lots of different places, and our ancestors married spouses who themselves were from different places. A DNA test to tell you where your ancestors originated isn't very important if you grew up in a village in the equatorial rain forest of Brazil or the arid steppes of Mongolia. Chances are your ancestors ten, fifteen generations behind you also grew up there and there isn't a lot of variety in your ancestral DNA. But that's not true for most of us. If you go back into your family tree just five generations, your great-great-great grandparents, you have 32 direct ancestors. Given that the United States is a nation comprised largely of immigrants, both voluntary and involuntary, from dozens of different countries and ethnic groups, that's a lot of opportunity for variety, even within one family.

Knowing where your family is from is mostly fun and informative. It can help broaden our sense of identity. Discovering that a part of your family line came from Russia or some of your ancestors were Native American when you thought they all came from England or Scotland might give you a greater appreciation for those cultures and make you want to learn something about them. Who knows, discovering your family origins might even increase your tolerance and openness to those who are different than you are.

But there can be a darkside to cataloguing and categorizing and delineating our familial origins. It's great to be proud of one's background and culture and ethnicity. But one person's pride can sometimes be perceived as another person's threat. New people moving into a community, whose complexion is different, who eat different foods, whose accent is strange and who might speak a different language at home, can be welcomed with open arms, or shut out, ignored, or worse. Harassed, discriminated against, subject even to violence. It's been going on here in this nation since the beginning, with one group already settled and established resenting the intrusion of another wave of immigrants. Here's what one person wrote about another group coming to America. See if you can guess who was speaking and about what group he was speaking about. I'm going to paraphrase it a little so as to leave out the direct references.

"Those who come here are generally of the most ignorant Stupid Sort of their own Nation...few of (us) understand the(ir) Language, and so cannot address them either (in print or in public) it is almost impossible to remove any prejudices they once entertain...Not being used

to (our way of life), they know not how to make a modest use of it...I remember when they modestly declined (to participate) in our Elections, but now they come in droves, and (their people win every election). ...In short, unless the stream of their importation could be turned from this to other colonies, they will soon so out-number us, (so that we will not) be able to preserve our language, and even our Government will become precarious."

Who was threatened by these newcomers, and who were these "ignorant Stupid Sort of their own nation" whose foreign language threatened his way of life? These words were written by Benjamin Franklin in the 1760's. And the people he was complaining about? Germans, immigrating to Pennsylvania. Maybe Benjamin Franklin would have been happier if these new immigrants were coming from Norway.

Some people truly believe that where you're from and who your family is says a lot about you as a person. Some people believe that who your family is and where you're from is all they need to know about you. This type of prejudice is precisely what Nathanael displays when he's told by his friend Philip they have found the Messiah. This Messiah, Philip told him, was "Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Jesus identified by family and place. And Nathanael's reaction? "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" You can hear Nathanael say, "What kind of a hole is Nazareth?"

So, here's Jesus, receiving the same kind of treatment that Germans did in the 1700's, or the Irish did in the 1800's, or the Poles and Italians did in the early 1900's, or Africans brought here on slave ships have always experienced, or Haitians, Syrians and El Salvadorans today.

But here's the thing. This Jesus sees something in Nathanael that goes beyond Nathanael's own blatant prejudice. He sees something else. He sees a person who sincerely desires to know God. That's the reference to the sitting under a fig tree, which is a euphemism for studying the scriptures. Nathanael wants to know God, stuck as he is in the prison of his own misguided belief that a person's family, or place, or ethnic background determines who that person is. Jesus sees beyond Nathanael's own restrictions of attitude and prejudice and begins to show him a better way. "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." You will see the kingdom of God, Jesus says. A kingdom that isn't based on where you're from, or who your family is, but solely upon the grace and love of God which draws all people to himself to become his children.

That's who Jesus is. He sees beyond the prisons and bondages we create for ourselves. He looks into our hearts and he doesn't focus on our prejudices, or any of the other ways we rationalize ourselves to be better than someone else or group of people. He sees us along with every other person ever created, as his beloved children.

As disciples of Jesus we are called to live by that vision. We are shaped by the kingdom of God and its declaration that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, Greek or Jew, male or female, German or African or Native American or Haitian or Norwegian or Syrian. At the foot of the cross we are all brothers and sisters. Amen.