

The Family's DNA

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Ephesians 3: 14-21

It's good to be back with you. If I'm remembering correctly, this is sort of my slot in the church year at the Community Church of Wilmette: the second half of summer, when it's usually hotter than ... normal, and the pastor has the good sense to be away – hopefully to somewhere cooler, although I understand Tripp and Trish are in Virginia for a wedding, so I'm not sure any of these assumptions hold in this particular case.

Again, if memory serves me right however, the last time I was here was actually was not in summer but last September for a Revive-All, at which, yes, I preached, but more importantly, I got to do some imitation Johnny Cash on a song called, "When The Man Comes Around." I just want to let you know that I went out and bought the album, that I'm listening to it, and that I'm still practicing—in case I get a similar invitation to be here at future Revive-All. Let me show you the results of my practicing: "When the Man Comes Around." What do you think?

I am genuinely delighted to be back with you, and especially when you've asked me to focus on the American Baptist Churches of Metro Chicago – to address what our Region is, and what it actually does. Actually, I'm not going to spend a lot of time doing that, except for calling your attention to the descriptive statements about our Mission, Identity, and Commitments in the bulletin or our website (www.abcmc.org).

Let me add that in our Baptist polity, the Region has no power to coerce a member congregation to believe some particular doctrine or to do particular things, since we hold that every individual congregation is autonomous and free, just as we believe that every individual person is, for purpose of decision-making, autonomous and free. But in our autonomy and freedom, individually and as congregations, we indeed *can choose* to be together, to do what it is that we believe is God's will not just for our lives but also for the life of neighborhoods, cities and communities, states and nations, and, yes, the whole world that God entrusts to us.

Now, I recognize that this absolutely central point about being a Baptist – about autonomy and freedom, and about the unencumbered choice concerning when and how to be together – isn't always our reputation in the wider public. In fact, our Baptist *reputation* is often just the opposite: that we believe we're this monolithically body of believers chosen by God to force our beliefs on everybody else and have everybody

else act in exactly the way we believe is God-the-Judge's demand for the whole world. And, the way some – maybe even a lot – of Baptists act, that reputation is deserved. A lot of Baptists act exactly that way.

But, to draw on the image of my sermon title this morning, this coercive and oppressive way of being a Baptist is actually *not* our authentic DNA, but is, to continue to use the imagery of genetics, a dangerous viral mutation that threatens what I understand to be one of our central Baptist contributions to not just Christianity and other types of religious life but also to understanding authentic human existence and human community.

So, you ask, what does this have to do with what "Regions" do in our American Baptist way of organizing ourselves, and specifically what does it mean for the American Baptist Churches of Metro Chicago? It simply this: our Region is a mechanism to help congregations, in their freedom and autonomy, to do better together what they can't do as well by themselves, and to do better by themselves as individual congregations what only they can and are called by God to do. So, when churches want our help doing either of those two things, we're ready to do it – whether it is engaging in a local or national or international project or mission (such as Children in Poverty or working to stop sex trafficking) or to calling a new pastor to a church, whether it is developing resources together that churches can use for education or stewardship or outreach into their communities, or trying to resolve conflicts in congregations.

You can see how we try to bring focus to all of this by referring to that section of the bulletin and website dealing with "commitments," but we aren't limited to those by any means. And you can see from the section on "identity" that we've chosen, as a Region, to say that we're "Gospel-centered" – that is, Good News-centered – rather than, as many Baptist and Christian bodies put it, "Christ-centered." Why? Because, according to this understanding, Jesus is named the Evangel since, more than anything else, he brought the Good News of what God is always doing in the world: working to have us stop being preoccupied only with ourselves and re-directing us to a preoccupation with building an inclusive community – a Beloved Community, as Dr. Martin Luther King put it – of mutual care for one another and for the world. That's the Good News of Jesus the Evangel, and that's the Good News we're called to share as disciples of that Evangel. So that's who we are as an American Baptist *region* in this great metropolitan area.

Now let's do the business at hand and together preach that Gospel – that Good News – that Jesus the Evangel proclaimed and put into action.

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The key text for this sermon comes from the Ephesians reading: chapter three, verses 14 – 21.

For this reason I (let me add here: "freely") bow my knees before God our

[Ultimate] Parent (keep in mind the DNA imagery), from whom *every family* (note: not just Baptist or Christian or American families but *every family*) in heaven and on earth takes its name (here we need to understand that name refers to “identity,” so that everyone’s identity is wrapped up genetically to God our Ultimate Parent). I pray that, according to the *riches* of God’s glory (which has to do with God’s genetic make-up), God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being (think again genetically), with power (read energy) through God’s Spirit, and that Christ (a pure inheritor, an authentic offspring, and genuine bearer of God’s DNA) may dwell in your hearts (the central organ giving you on-going life), through faith (your fundamental commitment), as you are being rooted (think genetics) and grounded (think DNA) in love (love: the absolutely fundamental characteristic of who God is and what God does and what God wants of the world and wants of us).

That’s it. That’s the sermon.

Oh, something more is expected of me? OK, a little excurses on this text, but only a little.

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In the American Baptist Churches of Metro Chicago we’re big on “family.” Did you notice that our Mission Statement indicates that: “We are a *Family* of American Baptist Churches...” And to make good on that claim, we have a “*Family* Document” that describes our governance as a region, and within that governance we have a “*Family* Council” that other organizations call their “board of directors,” and we have a “*Family* Cabinet” that other organizations call their “executive committee.”

Do you get the idea – we’re *family* oriented!

Not, I think, for the *wrong* reasons, which, for me, would be to play into the recent American cultural theme of “family values” – an attempt, as far as I can tell, to take one particular historical and social understanding of the family in composition and meaning and attempt to make it universal; when, in fact, historically and socially the “family” has taken many shapes and sizes, been given many meanings and values, has served a wide diversity of purposes and functions. The “family values” initiative, I’m sure, served a number noble ends, but it was and remains highly exclusionary and judgmental about what should pass for the “good” family.

I hope we don’t represent the worst of that movement when in ABCMC we refer to ourselves repeatedly as a family. I hope we mean it in both its biblical and scientific sense, both of which, I think it is fair to say, hold that the “family” is, in all of its historical and cultural diversity, a fundamental unit of organic (including human) reality.

Scientifically, the “family” is assumed in all the turn toward genetics in botany and biology, maybe even in chemistry and physics – although, clearly I’m out of my depth when I tread in these scientific waters. But, for the moment, just think about how much of our modern (think Charles Darwin) and contemporary (think James Watson and Francis Crick) scientific work revolves around the transfer of genes from one generation to another. Think how prominent the term “DNA” is now a part of our

everyday lingo to describe what is essential and on-going despite all the variations, all the mutations, and adaptations. And all of that goes back, in some sense, to what we've meant by "family."

And then biblically the "family stuff" is there from beginning to end, with an awfully lot in the vast middle: Adam and Eve, and Sarah and Hagar and Abraham, and all the genealogies, and the Holy Family, and God being the Father and Jesus being the Son and Mary being the mother of Jesus (and, for some Christians, the Mother of God), and Jesus redefining who are his sisters and brothers, and all the attention to family life in the early church.

I guess I'm especially sensitive or attentive to this because in the last few months I've become a great grandfather, and, as I hold that infant in my arms, I look at her and realize that there's some of my genes – some of my DNA – there. Some *essential* part of me lives on in that child, along with Leila's other great grandparents.

Pretty stunning isn't it? – when you think about it.

And it isn't just biological. In a much looser way, to be sure, there's also the transfer of social and cultural "genes" going on.

It's sort of frightening for every parent to realize what your child is picking up from what they observe, and what they experience, what they internalize, what they make their own *from you*.

And that includes what they get *religiously* from us – despite adolescent rebellion.

I was reminded of that the other day when a friend forwarded me by e-mail a list of actual letters from kids to God:

"Dear God, I went to a wedding and they kissed right in the church. Is that OK? Neil."

"Dear God, I think about you sometimes even when I'm not praying. Elliott"

"Dear God, I'm an American, what are you? Robert."

"Dear God, if you watch in church on Sunday, I will show you my new shoes. Mickey."

"Dear God, if we come back as something, please don't let me be Jennifer Horton— because I hate her. Denise."

"Dear God, If you give me a genie like Alladin, I will give you everything you want... except money and my chess set. Raphael."

"Dear God, please send Dennis Clark to a different camp this year. Peter"

"Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. Joyce."

Or the one I found the most revealing:

"Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family, and I can never do it. Nan."

Nan must have been reading Ephesians. She got the point, one way or another, that God her Ultimate Parent was all about love – that in the whole family of humankind, our original and essential genetic make-up, our DNA, is that love that God has – that genetic-like capacity to care not just for ourselves but also, like God, to care for others.

But – and Nan recognizes that it is a big “but” – somehow we, who are the children of that God of love, have messed up the genetic structure, and rather than loving both ourselves and others, we’ve become a lot more prone to caring much more for ourselves than for other people. So that even within our own biological and genetic family, even with all the genes we share and all that we know from evolutionary biology and psychology about how we care for our immediate genetic family more than we care for those who have a slightly different genetic make-up, even with all of that, we sometimes find that we, as Nan puts it, can never do it, we can never love with the abandon toward other members of the family like God loves us and the whole world.

Now, if Nan continues to wrestle with this book called Ephesians, which supposedly was written by the Apostle Paul but was probably actually written by a group of Paul’s students, and rather than being addressed only to the Christians in Ephesus was probably distributed to many of the early churches, Nan will find this incredible – this truly hard-to-believe – claim that in what Jesus, who we call the Christ or the Messiah or the Chosen One of God, in what he said and what he demonstrated and what he did, we can recapture, reclaim, restore our original DNA, we can recapture, reclaim, restore our capacity to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love and care ourselves properly and – here’s the truly amazing part – to love and care for others – even those who are radically different from us in genetic or social or cultural make-up – with a kind of generosity and fervor that will bring pride and satisfaction and pleasure and joy to God, our Ultimate Parent.

Over the decades and over the centuries, there have been, quite honestly, differences of opinion about how God accomplished all of this in Jesus. But what is beyond dispute is that because of whatever happened in Jesus’ life and death and what his followers understood as his resurrection, lives were radically changed—not just individual lives, but lives lived together in families and – here’s a startling fact – lives lived in a new family that identified itself with Jesus, even to the point of saying that this new family, in all of its genetic and social and cultural and national diversity, was the ongoing, earthly body of Christ, that it was trying to be the large family of God where love is the essential characteristic, where love is the essential genetic code, where love is the primal DNA.

It’s true: a lot of the time it has failed miserably. Sometimes this family of God identified with Jesus has made a mockery of the God of love and of God Chosen Child, Jesus. It worships a God, not of inclusive love, but a narrow God who is a ruthless judge and turns Jesus into one of the very Pharisees he opposed so radically. It still does – still acts like this God of love doesn’t exist and as if Jesus never happened. It’s shameful. And we can certainly understand why people outside the family want nothing to do with it.

But make no mistake about it. There has always been and there still are people who gather together in Jesus' name, who recognize him as the Evangel – the bearer of God's Good News about what God is always doing in the world to overcome the sin of self-centeredness and to bring people together in a redeeming community of love and care for one another and for those who are in need of that love and care, whatever their standing in society, or their lack of it.

There are pockets of that renewed and redeemed family of God in neighborhoods and villages, in cities and nations across the globe, and, in many cases, they are freely joined together so they can do together what they can't do by themselves, and to do better what they alone can do. ABCMC is one expression of that coming together of the family of God, trying to make love the essential characteristic of our part of the family of God in this metropolitan region.

I thank God for you in this family of God in this community of Wilmette, for what you do right here and what you do in places farther away, for what you contribute to our life as a regional family, and what you do to give hope to the Nan's of our world.

There's nothing, absolutely nothing, coercive about what I'm going to invite you to do now. It's just this: in silence to recognize and to focus on your Ultimate Parent who makes you a part of an all-inclusive family, whose DNA is love, to recognize that God is strengthening you through the power of God's Spirit to be a lover and someone who has the capacity to care not just for yourself but for others, to receive Christ into your heart again today, to let his DNA work within you so that you can recover and reclaim your own essential DNA, and to recognize, through the eyes of faith, that you are being rooted and grounded in love.

Silence

Let us pray:

Love Divine, all love excelling, Joy of heaven to earth come down.
Fix in us Thy humble dwelling, All Thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, Thou art all compassion. Pure, unbounded love Thou art.
Visit us with Thy salvation. Enter every trembling heart.

Amen