

Over the past 15 or so years, there appears to have been an increased interest in family ancestry. One of the reasons for this observation is the many resources available for individuals to research their family through websites like ancestry.com and home DNA testing kits available for purchase. There are people I know who have found these resources helpful in revealing family members they did not know they had. Another entertaining format about discovering family ancestry is the PBS series *Finding Your Roots* with Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. which has been sharing the discoveries of celebrities' families for 7 years. Using multiple forms of resources including DNA and ancestry records, Dr. Gates and his research teams are also discovering their results are changing the way people define family.

Sometimes the findings are contrary to how the celebrity they are researching defined themselves. For example, in the most recent episode, a comedian who believed he was a quarter Japanese and attributed his love for Japanese food and culture to his heritage discovered he is not Japanese at all, he is actually Korean because his Korean grandfather assumed a Japanese identity at a time when Koreans were persecuted. The comedian handled this well by learning more about this grandfather he hardly knew and a whole new world of people and places opened up to him as he discovered connections he didn't know he had.

In that same episode, a famous folk singer discovered her grandmother had emigrated from Cuba where her family had been free blacks or mixed-race individuals who were descended from slaves. This folk singer discovered her DNA was ten percent African, and suddenly she had connections to places and people she had not imagined.

Sometimes the discoveries are even more dramatic. Musician and actor LL Cool J learned his mother was adopted and although he has nothing but love and gratitude for the grandparents that took him and his mother in when he was only 4 years old and stood with them in their most desperate times, through DNA analysis he discovered his family was a little larger and more inclusive than he had thought.

Every once in a while, the discoveries Dr. Gates and his research team uncover are more troubling for the celebrities. An actor learned his German uncle, his father's brother, was a Nazi soldier. While not happy to learn this reality, he said it explained why his father left Germany, why he never talked about his uncle, and why his father embraced life in America, living in a neighborhood comprised of immigrants from all over the world. Another white actor tried to get Dr. Gates to omit the part of his

ancestry that revealed some of his ancestors were slave owners. A black radio talk show host struggled emotionally when he learned his grandfather was white. These revelations were troubling because they challenged how those celebrities understood family, and revealed that family can be so much more inclusive of people very different from the immediate family members we grew up with, and there are connections to people and places they were unaware of and maybe didn't want to be part of. And while these discoveries can be uncomfortable, they can also demonstrate families are more complex and diverse than is often assumed.

Thanks to efforts like those of Dr. Gates and the people who research the ancestries of families, we all are exposed to a new understanding of family: one that has more connections to people and places we thought we were unrelated to. In truth, we may all be more related to each other than we assume, and family may be bigger than we thought.

This widening of the vision of family is a lot like today's celebration of All Saints Day. For those unfamiliar with this annual celebration, it is one of the Principle Feast Days of the Church. Which means it is equally important as Christmas and Easter, Pentecost and Epiphany. It is so important it is the only Feast that can be celebrated on the first Sunday after its calendar date of November 1. It's so important, the church doesn't want us to miss it or skip over it as we go about our busy weekday lives.

As the name suggests, it is a celebration of all the saints. But the name can be misleading. If you follow the church calendar, you'll notice that there are days devoted to people the church calls saints, people who were heroes in some way. Maybe they were martyrs and died serving the church. Others helped form the church as we know it or changed it to make it better. These remarkable men and women are remembered for their suffering and their piety and their contributions. But by calling them saints we also tend to distance ourselves from them instead of feeling connected to them. We immortalize them in stained glass or statues or a brief biography in resources like *Holy Men and Holy Women* or the many books on saints. The trouble with this is, we tend to believe what makes a person a saint is their perfection, not their wholeness. They may be heroes of the faith, but that is not what makes them saints.

Instead, we see what makes a person a saint by turning to the words of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians we heard read this morning. In this, and in pretty much all his letters to the different churches, Paul refers to the people in those churches as saints. Yet, in those letters, he usually ends up chastising bad behaviors of these very same saints and calling them to correct those behaviors to be more in line with the Beatitudes we heard in the Gospel this morning. So, in Paul's letters it wasn't behavior that made a person a saint. What made a person a saint was being part of

the church. Saints are simply the baptized persons who make up what we call the Body of Christ. Which, Paul reminds us, doesn't mean we can get away with anything, it means we need to be conscientious of how we live so that our lives reflect God's love as Jesus revealed it to the world.

But this is not why we celebrate All Saints Day. It is not a day to celebrate ourselves. It is a day when we step back and reflect on that Body of Christ. Too often, I fear we are guilty of thinking of the Church as an empty institution of rules and buildings. Or we are guilty of thinking only of our own parish. In truth, Church is much more than those small things. Church is all the saints living and dead who are or have been part of the Body of Christ throughout the whole wide world. In every country in every city in every small rural town. They are people like you and me and they are people very different from you and me. The Church is not windows and doors and walls and pews and rooms and organs and rules. The Church is people who have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection who choose to live as followers of Jesus.

Like the celebrities on *Finding Your Roots*, sometimes we learn that our fellow saints were not always perfect. Saints are people who make mistakes, like we all do, who sometimes fail, who don't always win. Saints aren't heroes. And that is a good thing, as the Rev. Sam Wells Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, England writes, "A saint can fail in a way a hero can't because the failure of the saint reveals the forgiveness and the new possibilities made in God, and the saint is just a small character in the story that is always fundamentally about God."

In other words, those mistakes or failures can be a conduit for God to redeem and connect us. And reminds us our role as saints, as members of the Church, as the Body of Christ in the world, is not to be heroes. We are to keep telling the story of Jesus, to point people to the new resurrection life Christ brings to us all. Whether we are plumbers, or teachers, or students, or priests, or spouses, or children or soldiers or pilots or writers or singers or entertainers or researchers or maintenance workers, or baristas or managers or business owners, or bishops or prophets, retired, gardeners, advocates, parents, athletes, artists.....whatever ways we earn a living or whatever lives we are called to, we are first and foremost saints, members of the Body of Christ, connected to each other and to Christ, who are to let that light of Christ shine through us.

As part of our celebration today we are also reading aloud the names of those who have died. This is not intended to cause pain to anyone grieving the loss of a loved one. The reason we do this once a year is because of our belief that death is not an ending of the connection we have as members of the Body of Christ. Death is a transition, a change, not an ending. That means we are still connected to those we love, even after they die. So we read the names of those who died as a way of naming

our connection to them, and to remember the Body of Christ is so wide and inclusive there is room for those we love but see no longer. They are still part of us, and we are still part of them. That connection is real.

We could say All Saints Day is a day we celebrate our connections to the Body of Christ, to the Church and to God through Jesus. It is the day to celebrate what the people who research their family trees discover: that we are part of and connected to something larger and more diverse than we thought, something that might include individuals we would prefer not to be associated with, or with people we couldn't imagine being connected to. That's okay, because we are all part of God's family tree, and there is room for all of us to learn and grow in those life-giving roots and branches of God's love.