

Sermon Baptism of Jesus B January 7, 2017

Ancestry and Identity

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In these days there seems to be a popular fascination with ancestry. Not just simple family trees, but a deeply thorough rooting through of records and DNA tests. It's a lot of work, and there are plenty of resources to help with this work such as websites, professional genealogists, even DNA kits where you can send a swab of saliva to a lab and receive a detailed account of your DNA and who shares your DNA.

All this fascination with ancestry seems to be like a journey, a searching for something. Some are searching for past family members, others are searching for family they might not be aware they have. Others are searching for truths they suspect have been lost in too many family secrets. And some are searching for their identity.

One of the ways this fascination with ancestry has manifested itself is in the popular television show on Public Television hosted by Dr. Henry Louis Gates called *Finding Your Roots*. The premise of this program is that celebrities submit themselves to the expertise of Dr. Gates and his team of genealogists and researchers who delve into the family histories of the guest celebrities to discover their ancestry. I enjoy watching this program; I love seeing how people are connected with each other, and how there are almost always surprises that help the guests know more about their families. As the program begins, many celebrities say they are excited because they hope to find their true identity.

Most of the time, the guests are pleasantly surprised, and discover their ancestors had a lot in common with them, they held many of the same ideals, or did amazing things, and this makes the guest feel good about who they are. However, there are times when the guest learns they have what we could call unsavory relatives in their family trees: people who committed crimes or who participated in practices that are not in line with the guest's values.

One of the celebrities who experienced this recently on *Finding Your Roots* was actor Ben Affleck. Ben learned he had an ancestor who was a slave owner, and when he heard this, his spirit was visibly crushed. It was obvious he had higher hopes for his family and this was a truth that he was not comfortable with. I thought Dr. Gates was incredibly kind to Ben during that reveal. He didn't blame Ben, or make it sound like Ben was now a bad person, he just let Ben take in this hard to receive information and reminded him it was his ancestor who was the slave owner, not Ben. While Ben is connected to his ancestor, he is not expected to live the same way. Dr. Gates also

revealed another ancestor of Ben Affleck's was an active abolitionist who helped many slaves escape slavery, which shows any one's family tree can be unapologetically filled with diversity; some of which a person might be proud of, some of which they might not.

Finding the two different ancestors in Ben Affleck's family tree could put the fascination with searching for identity by searching for our ancestors into a helpful perspective. None of us can control what is past, or who is in our family trees. For those who get upset about family secrets, perhaps discovering some of the troubling aspects of a family history might cause them to be less critical and more understanding about why some family secrets exist. Others who use their family trees to lift up their own importance might realize no one has a perfect family and we can't claim our entire identity on family history; it is part of who we are, but not all of who we are. It also can help all of us see the need to participate in repenting of the sins of our fathers and mothers instead of denying them. I believe such repentance could be instrumental in eradicating the evils of sexism, racism, and many of the other 'isms' that are hurting humanity.

It also can help us remember that our families, the human family or human condition is messy, which is where Jesus enters into humanity in Mark's Gospel. We just heard the author of Mark's account of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, who was preparing people for the appearance of the divine by baptizing, but this baptism is not the baptism we are familiar with and many of us share. John was doing what Dr. Gates sometimes does on his TV program, John was helping people come to terms with their sins and the sins of their fathers and mothers. According to Mark's Gospel people left the comfort of their homes to come to John the Baptist who wore uncomfortable clothing in the uncomfortable wilderness, to listen to his uncomfortable message and receive an uncomfortable baptism, which showed they needed to be washed of their sins, because all their stories and families and lives were messy with sins.

And into that same water, dirty with the sins of humanity, came Jesus. Jesus, God's Son, was not afraid to enter the baptism of repentance to show that he stands not above the mess human sin can cause, but right in the middle of it. And that is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus, because that is where we are, where humanity is. None of us is above the problems, pains, losses, horrors, violence, injustices, or greed caused by the sins of humanity; we are in the middle of it, whether we want to be or not. Jesus chose to stand with us in the mess of sin because that is where God wanted to be; God wants to identify with us.

And into that messiness where humanity is and Jesus stood, God spoke. Mark's Gospel tells us when Jesus emerged from the waters of repentance, the heavens were torn open, the Holy Spirit descended looking like a dove, and God spoke. This is not the first time God spoke into a messy situation. This morning we also heard about the first time God spoke in our lesson from Genesis, when God spoke Light into being. Things were messy then, too. There was no form to the earth; there was, the writers of Genesis tell us, a void, and waters of chaos swirling about. Then God spoke, and there was light, a change, the first of many changes God called good. Genesis reminds us when God speaks, there is change.

That is no small thing. Before God spoke on the day of Jesus' baptism, God first made a change by destroying something.

One of the questions often debated and discussed by theologians is why God isn't speaking anymore. One theologian answers this question by stating that our Biblical ancestors had a different understanding of identity than the modern person. Our ancestors did not believe their identity was centered on or originated with themselves as individuals. Their identity was deeply rooted in their belief that they were part of something larger than themselves, God's People, and the stories of their ancestors who followed God out of their comfort zones into the wilderness (folks like Abraham and Sarah or David) were stories about who they were. They believed they were loved by God, and therefore God would speak to them as a people, through messengers like prophets and occasionally angels. Over time, things changed for our Biblical ancestors as they began to develop a theology where God was in heaven, and therefore distant, and harder to hear. Besides this, the words of the prophets were not always received with open arms, as God's message can be uncomfortable, usually calling for a change. Which makes another theologian wonder, if people just stopped listening because they didn't want to hear what God had to say.

That could very well be what God destroyed when God tore open the heavens in Mark's Gospel; a barrier created by human stubbornness; the refusal to hear what makes us uncomfortable.

And doesn't it say something remarkable about God, whose words God tore apart the heavens to speak, to the one standing with sinners in those waters dirtied with sin, were not words of condemnation, but words of love. The words God may have been aching to speak into the mess of humanity were this: "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased." God is not upset Jesus chose to stand with sinners, God is well pleased, because this love God is giving isn't just for Jesus, it is for all of us, for God sees us all as God's sons and daughters. And even when we are in a mess, God loves us and wants to be with us, because even when we are in a mess God wants to identify with us.

Many of us may find these words hard to believe, especially if we've longed to hear them uttered from parents, spouses, children, friends, clergy, employers, or just anyone at all. Yet here they are, whether we believe them or not, with the powerful message that no matter where we find our identity, no matter who we think we are; God knows who we are: we are God's beloved.

Jesus' ministry, therefore, begins with his identity being quite similar with Ben Affleck's and all of us: standing in the uncomfortable place with sinners and being loved by God.

Perhaps Jesus' Baptism also reminds us that words that cause discomfort might just be words we need to hear, truths we need to face, and indicate changes we need to make. God is still speaking whether we listen or not.

That is why one of the changes we made to our service today is in place of the Nicene Creed we will renew our baptismal vows; the promises we made or were made for us when we were baptized. This is not the same as John the Baptists' baptism; our baptism is what we believe unites us to Jesus death and new life of his resurrection, and gives us our identity as the Body of Christ. Like any ancestry, we might be painfully aware of the unsavory members of the Body of Christ who have caused harm in Jesus' name, or the times when the Church cared more about power and prestige than following Jesus. There are plenty of people ready to remind us of the many ways the Body of Christ needs to repent of its sins, and has too often tried to hide or deny its sins rather than confess the need of forgiveness. That is why it is important that we have times when we change from reciting what we believe, as when we speak the words of the Nicene Creed, to renewing our vows, renewing our commitment to follow Jesus, even following him into those uncomfortable places where we may have to face our own sins and need of repentance. For like Ben Affleck learned, we don't have to repeat the sins of our Church Fathers and Mothers, we can be the change God wants us to be.

When we renew our baptismal vows, we are doing more than renewing our commitment to following Jesus. We are remembering our identity; who we are. We are God's beloved, so if we hear words that make us uncomfortable, because they may be calling us to change, we can remember we don't have to hide or deny our own sin. Our own sin means we are not above anyone else. We can stand with humanity, not in shame, but in hope, because God's love forgives; we are forgiven, and so we can live our vows, and, through living the identity those vows describe, we can help someone see that Jesus is standing with them as well. Being part of the Body of Christ means we are all in this life of following Jesus together with Jesus, so that Jesus can be known.