

OUR (DYSFUNCTIONAL) FAMILY TREE

Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2

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Genealogy has been a favorite hobby for a long time. I have a notebook that belonged to my grandmother, full of handwritten pages of notes she'd made as she researched. For better or worse, she traced part of our family tree back to the founders of the Reynolds tobacco company. I know people who have made pilgrimages to Ireland to meet relatives, and others who have traced names from old gravestones and made appointments at little town courthouses in Nebraska, trying to find information on their relatives. In recent years, it became much easier to trace your relatives using websites like ancestry.com. And then, even more recently, services like 23 and me give precise data on everything from relatives to genetic predisposition to diseases.

How many of you have taken a 23 and me type test? How many of you were surprised at something you discovered?

Information is rarely neutral. Some of the information uncovered has been extremely helpful, while some has been disturbing. Do you want to know, for example, that you are predisposed to certain diseases? In some cases, you might be able to take preventive measures. In other situations, the knowledge just might make you more anxious and actually, therefore, less healthy.

Likewise, knowing more about your family tree can be fun - two people in our church, for example, have discovered that they are distant cousins! Doug and I have a relative who only last summer found out that she has a sibling. She's in her late 50's and has lived all this time, thinking she was an only child. She met her sibling for the first time this past fall and is thrilled to have a brother, a sister-in-law, nieces and nephews.

Other people, though, have found out long-hidden family secrets. Imagine discovering, long after your parents have died, that the dad you grew up with was not your biological father. Imagine discovering that you were adopted and you never knew it.

Let me ask you another question. Let's say you're at a social gathering, a large event where people are chit-chatting with each other. Are you more likely to tell someone about a relative you have who's famous, well-known for some accomplishment, or are you more likely to tell about the relative who spent time in jail, the one who's barely surviving? It's human nature for us to be proud of our associations with successful people and a tad bit embarrassed about those in our families who aren't doing well.

The book of Hebrews is written to serve as an encouraging sermon to those in the early church who were being persecuted and who were losing hope. The writer of Hebrews reminds these struggling Christians of who they are and who and where they come from...this is a long pep talk, a way of saying, "Other people have faced challenges, too. Other people have been tempted to give up. But faith can be revived."

We don't know who wrote the book of Hebrews, but we know that the author is determined to make his point. He gives example after example of people who have kept the faith. "Remember," he says, "when the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea?" "And remember when they marched around the wall that surrounds the city of Jericho - they marched for seven days?" "Remember those who fought in battles, those who were imprisoned, those who were stoned to death and those who were tortured? All of them kept the faith." He goes on to mention specific names of people from the Hebrew scriptures. Names of heroes like Samuel and Gideon...

But here's the interesting part. This sermon also mentions, by name, a woman named Rahab. There aren't a lot of women mentioned in the Bible. Often, the scriptures

will just say “some women” were also there...so when a woman is mentioned by name, we pay attention. In this passage, this hall of fame of faith, we get Rahab. Who was she? She was a prostitute from the city of Jericho. She also courageously hid two Hebrew spies in her home at the time when Jericho was under siege, proving that her faith was stronger than her fear.

So Hebrews shines a favorable light on a woman who was a prostitute, not because of that, of course, but still, fascinating that the author of Hebrews isn't hiding this branch of our family tree...and then comes mention of David. King David is one of the leading figures in all Judaism. Jesus traces his direct ancestry to David. But David is also the very human man who commits adultery with Bathsheba and then makes sure that her husband Uriah is killed in battle. David is yet a man of faith...a musician, a warrior, and king of Israel for 40 years.

Why in the world would Hebrews mention these two? Certainly not so that we can emulate them in every way. Their tragic mistakes, their sinful behavior are not being celebrated here. But these two are still listed in scripture, as is Samson who has his own morally problematic story. It doesn't seem like an accident to me, or a coincidence. It seems, rather, completely intentional, that the names of deeply flawed people are listed in this hall of fame of faith. Maybe that is the point. That we can be both deeply flawed and deeply faithful at the same time.

The point continues to be made in the gospels when we see Jesus choose his twelve disciples. He has a biological family, but then he chooses these twelve to be like family to him, some of his closest followers. He doesn't go to the rabbis and ask for the top students. He doesn't go to the town square and see who is making eloquent speeches, nor does he select successful merchants. No, he hangs out around the seashore and

asks a random fisherman. Then he asks a tax collector, which was far from an honorable profession at the time. He chooses twelve. He doesn't ask for their resumes or for references. As we observe them, we wonder if perhaps what qualified them was simply their very humanness. They were ordinary. They were flawed. We can relate to them.

They spent more time with Jesus than anyone else, yet they were full of doubts and questions about him and his ministry. Three of the disciples became closest to Jesus, his inner circle - Peter, James and John. And yet Peter is the one who, after Jesus is arrested, says, "Me? I didn't know that guy." He denies three times that he even knows Jesus. The Bible seems to be making the point, boldly, in capital letters, so that we can't miss it, that we can be deeply flawed and deeply faithful. Faith isn't about being perfect. Faith isn't about having no doubts or questions. Faith is about being in relationship. We are in relationship with God, and God knows all of our faults and mistakes. God forgives us, again and again. God keeps faith with us because God wants to be in relationship with us.

Faith is not so much about a destination as it is about a journey. God came to earth in human form so that we would never feel alone on this journey. We have one another, companions along the way. And the saints who have gone before us, each of them both flawed and faithful, are cheering us on, encouraging us to do our best and to take risks along the way.

The last part of our passage for today is a sports metaphor - it reminds us that in the ancient Olympics, the marathon race would end with the last lap in the arena - the runner would enter the stadium to a cheering crowd who'd been sitting in the stands waiting. Hebrews calls this crowd our "cloud of witnesses." Imagine, the writer says, that Jesus has already crossed the finish line of the race, urging and encouraging us on. And now the metaphor shifts from marathon to relay. Through Jesus, God hands on the baton to

each succeeding disciple, encouraging us to keep the faith in our time and pass it on to the next generation.

It's what we're doing today, as we pray for teachers and Sunday School teachers, as we affirm our ministry with children and youth. We don't claim to be perfect - any of us. We fall, we stumble, we get tired, we feel like giving up. But then we look around at each other, we remember those who have gone before us. We pray and become re-energized. And so we lace up our sneakers and get back on the track. Some days we walk and some days we jog, but we keep going, our eyes on Jesus, the one who knows all our faults and loves us anyway.

When my oldest child started public school, I was relatively new to Ohio. I lived in a nearby suburb in a rented house, and I felt like an outsider. I distinctly remember my son playing soccer one sunny afternoon, and I sat on the sidelines and watched. All around me were conversations about home remodeling projects I couldn't relate to and social events to which I wasn't invited; everyone else greeted each other as if they were lifelong friends. I remember thinking, "I'll bet I'm the only person here who doesn't own her own home." It's so easy to fall into that comparison game, isn't it? To think, "Our family is the only one that's dealing with credit card debt." "No one else has the kind of in-law problems we have." "I couldn't tell anyone else what really goes on in our home - they would be appalled."

The truth is, every family is dealing with something. There is no perfect family. But the challenges of your life are not a barrier to your life of faith. Actually, the challenges of your life are the door to faith. When we realize our imperfections, we're more vulnerable and open. Then is when we realize we need God, we need guidance and forgiveness and companions on this sacred journey.

I pray for every family in this church. I pray for parents as you juggle crazy schedules, as you juggle the responsibilities of work, parenting, caring for yourselves, caring for your home, caring for your parents and maybe grandparents. I pray for each of you, no matter where you are on your life's journey, that we will find, in this church, people you can talk to — really talk to about how your life is going...know that everyone here is going through something, so there's no need to pretend that you're not.

As I was working on this sermon this week I came across a few descriptions of church. One person said this: "Church means that there is a hand to hold. It is the hand of both neighbor and stranger as we strive together to become a community that works to keep the circle of faith unbroken in a changing and broken world."

As disciples of Jesus in this congregation, we clearly see each other's shortcomings. At the same time, we trust, support, and encourage one another. Let us continue to become a place of learning, a safe place for asking questions and for discovery...let us continue to patiently tell our stories as best we can and welcome to hopeful and the hurting into our safe space. We are witnessing the work of a loving God who has not given up. We continue to offer up a word of blessing and hope to one another. Because we are broken ourselves, we pray, and sometimes we see that our faith - weak and imperfect as it is - helps others to find their way to God.

This is how together we become, and are becoming ever more fully, a trustworthy people of God, running the race with Jesus to keep faith in a changing world.

Let us pray. Holy God, thank you for keeping faith with us. Thank you for loving us in spite of all of our flaws and imperfections. We want to run the race with you, all the way to the finish line. In Jesus' name. Amen.