



“The Easter People: 2. What Genetic Testing Can’t Tell You”

Text: 1 John 3:1-7
a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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For generations, people have been wondering about the most existential of questions: “where did I come from?” Go back a few generations and the work of genealogy was the rage. My grandmother, on my mother’s side of the family, took up the work of our family’s genealogy, following the death of my uncle in a motorcycle accident. She traced our family back to Stirling, Scotland and I thought of her last year as Abigail and I walked those ancient streets. Her work was based on letters to churches that kept baptismal records and death records. It took years, but I now have the result of her labors, and I may need to add a few more pages to that work.

In more recent days, the work of genealogy has been coupled with science, and in particular, genetics. There are a variety of services vying for our business. For most, you swab the inside of your cheek, gather a few of those cells, and send it off for study. Then, in a few weeks, they send you a report that tells you your genetic makeup, based on race, ethnicity, and region of the world.

The ads are on television all the time. My favorite is the fellow who was raised all his life to think his family was from Germany, when, in fact, they were predominantly Scottish. He tells us, “I traded in my lederhosen for a kilt.” Having some experience in this area, this was not necessarily an upgrade. I can assure you that lederhosen are far less drafty than a kilt.

But people are being amazed at their background – especially those who are surprised at the results. Some people are astonished to discover that their family tree has grown in some unexpected soil. Some of the traditional family stories are being re-edited, because there are branches of the family tree that no one knew about, or, perhaps, talked about. Many have been startled and staggered to discover aspects of who they are that they’ve never known before.

In the passage from the First Letter of John that serves as our principle lesson for the day, we are invited to receive a report. To the first century inquiries into who those early believers were, the letter-writer tells them:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God – and that is what we are.

Children of God. A new creation. A new identity. A new self.

That report must have startled them. “Children of God? How did that happen?” “When did we ever have a god in our family?” “I thought mother’s family was from Gaul.”

Even if genetic testing had existed back then, this designation would never have shown up. It’s not genetic, or hereditary, or transmissible from one person to another. It is not innate, or inborn, or native to the human condition.

What makes us children of God is that God says we are. This assertion – this reality – is all through the pages of the First Letter of John. “Little children, you are from God...for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” (1 Jn. 4:4) “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” (1 Jn. 4:7) “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us...” (1 Jn. 4:10) “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God...” (1 Jn. 5:1) What makes us children of God is God’s love for us, reaching out to us, claiming us as God’s own.

For Christians, we see that most clearly in Jesus Christ. For us, Jesus Christ is God’s expression of love made known to us in flesh-and-blood. By living among us – “full of grace and truth” – we see most clearly and profoundly not only who God is, but who we are called to be and how we are called to live.

But, let’s take just a moment to state something that should be rather obvious. We are not the only people called “children of God.” In the Tanakh, the scriptures of the Jewish people, in Deuteronomy 14:1-2, we read:

You are children of the Lord your God...a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you that the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

When we Christians get a little too self-righteous and puff up with an unjustifiable pride that we are *exclusively* God's people, we need to be reminded that God chooses others to be as much God's people as we are and that includes people we often set up to be less holy than ourselves. If we have learned anything as a result of "One God, One Community" – our interfaith relationship with Temple Adath B'nai Israel, the Islamic Society, and the congregation of St. Benedict Cathedral – it is that we hold far more in common than what divides us. Even when we do not share the same Scriptures, we know that a true reading of the Qur'an, is in harmony with more of the Tanakh and the Bible than we have been aware. These discoveries have brought new meaning to the words from First John:

Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as God is righteous. (1 Jn.3:7b)

Christians, Jews, and Muslims are children of God, though we view God through different lenses and traditions. We are all children of God, no less and no more.

Hear it one last time, this time from the New International Version:
See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

So, if you are in God's family, just as in every family, there are some rules – some policies – some practices that must be observed.

When I am doing pre-marital counseling, one of the first things I asked the couple is when, in their family of origin, they opened their Christmas presents. I ask this because the answer can be a deal-breaker. How many of you open presents on Christmas Eve? How many of you open them on Christmas morning? [How many of you are lucky enough to celebrate Hanukkah and get to open a gift every night for eight nights? How many of you get a gift on Eid, as the month of Ramadan comes to an end?] For Christian couples, whether you open Christmas gifts on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning is usually one of those unwritten rules or practices observed by the family and which must not be broken. And if one of the couple is a Christmas Eve opener and the other a Christmas morning opener, we get that worked out early on, because everything else the couple faces will be a piece of cake, once the Christmas gift-opening issue reaches an amicable conclusion.

In the Family of God, there are a few such rules and practices that must be observed. The author of the First Letter of John set a pretty high bar:

No one who abides in him [that is, God] sins...

So, if you are in the Family of God, there is no sinning. How's that going? Are you living without sin? Have you reached perfection since last Sunday? We know that's impossible. We aren't perfect people and we need not point out the imperfections of others to justify our own imperfections.

What First John seems to be telling us is that to sin is to not live with love for others. It's not about the big or little sins that tend to trip us up. It's more about the lack of love – the Greek word is *agapōn* the root of which is *agapē* – which means a self-sacrificing love, not unlike God's love for humankind. First John wants us to know that the sin that divides us from God and each other is the lack of self-sacrificing, self-denying love. When we fail to love God and neighbor, when we fail to seek the best for God and neighbor, we commit the most grievous sin of all. When we fail to live with a love that seeks the best for another, when our needs are more important than the needs of the people around us, when we fail to respect and value the other members of our family – biological and spiritual – we have failed to live up to our new name, “Child of God.”

This love-living is what we are called to as children of God and members of God's household. This self-sacrifice and selfless approach to life – an approach that some may not understand – is the hallmark of the people of God. This is who we are called to be.

“Child of God.” That's our new name. We receive it in our baptism. It is directly connected to Christ's death and resurrection. It is a calling to a new life and a new way of living. It means living as “The Easter People.”

And no matter which service you choose and no matter how much you pay, it will never show up on a genetic test. We are children of God – part of God's family – because God says we are. And we are not alone.

So, let us live as “The Easter People” and let us live the law of love: love for God and love for neighbor. For now and evermore. Amen.



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