

Family Roots

sermon digest

Advent I - November 29, 2009

Matthew 1:16-22

Larry Dipboye

Bill Hendricks was a young seminary professor when I was a student in Fort Worth. A decade ago, a few years before his death, he wrote a personal story in *Christian Ethics Today* entitled "Family Reunion."

Bill learned as a child that he was adopted. At age 67, long after the death of his adoptive parents, genetic health issues and a drive to find his roots set him on a quest to locate his birth family. After a year of waiting, he got a phone call from the Lutheran social worker in Montana assisting with the search. He learned that both of his parents were deceased and that they were not married, explaining the adoption of the baby. He joked, "Former students and critics who have thought I was a 'you-know-what' were right!" In an emotional first meeting, Hendricks, who had grown up as an only child, met six brothers and sisters for the first time. He told of a two-day reunion with his family, sharing of family stories, a visit with an elderly aunt, and visits to the graves of his parents. The siblings were also shocked to learn that they had an older brother. The physical family resemblance was obvious, but Bill was pleased to find that two of his brothers also had long careers in higher education. The family, mostly Roman Catholic and Episcopalian, were somewhat perplexed to discover that they had a Baptist in their midst, a seminary professor no less.

When I read a couple of years later that Dr. Hendricks had died, I recalled the article and the sense of fulfillment for him and his family as his life was drawing to a close. Something happens to us as we advance to senior level. We suddenly want to remember; we want to touch base with roots. Family connections, which had been unfortunate realities to be endured in childhood, become a focus of interest and attention. I had a cousin who, around age 60, traced our family to Philip Babb, a passenger on the Mayflower. I recently learned that the cabin of his son is to be restored in Greenville, TN. When my cousin continued her pursuit of the family to England and Europe, she finally arrived in Palestine with John the Baptist; and I reverted to my childhood suspicion of genealogy.

We are the product of our family roots. The Bible is loaded with "begats." They may not reflect scientific precision, but they do point to the importance of historical connection in the Jewish mind. Neighbors to the Jews thought that history runs in circles, coming from nowhere and going nowhere. Thomas Cahill noted the great contribution of the Jews to human civilization was a concept of time with a past and a future. They realized like no other culture that they were the product of their history.

The importance of Old Testament genealogy was the recognition of roots, not a scientific history on which you could prove your ancestry. Unfortunately, the "begats" were the basis for Archbishop Ussher's famous 18th century dating of creation on Sunday 23 October 4004 BC. In the 1968 movie "Finian's Rainbow" Fred Astaire quips that as soon as Eve ate the apple, the begats began. When someone wants to make a joke about the difficulty of staying awake while reading the Bible, they point to the numerous lists of ancestors. I once heard a comedian speak of reading the telephone directory, "a great cast but no plot." Don't be deceived. The genealogy of Jesus has a plot! You really can't miss the message. Even Jesus—Son of Abraham, Son of David, Son of God—is the product of history. All of us grow out of family roots with a born debt to our forebears, and nothing that we do in life is a solo act. We carry our ancestors around with us, not only in our biological DNA, but in decisive numerous acts.

You have to keep in perspective that Jesus was a nobody in Israel. The fact that we have no record of his ministry outside of the Gospels indicates that the world mostly ignored what he had to say and what he did. The Gospels make no pretensions. Jesus was mostly rejected by his own people and ignored by Rome. The same could be said of most of the people. Those who were not taxed into poverty were corrupted by compromise with Rome. Jesus was never identified with the aristocracy. He had no credentials to qualify him for priesthood and no tangible resources to buy prestige. Like most of his people, Jesus lived in poverty as a peasant.

Matthew and Luke present the only accounts of the birth of Jesus, and both present genealogical tables of his ancestry. There are similarities but the details are quite different. Matthew begins with Abraham and ends with Jesus, "son of David." Luke begins with Jesus and ends with Adam, "son of God." Matthew opens his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus. Luke inserts the genealogy between the baptism and temptation. Although both Gospels stress the virginity of Mary, they trace the family tree of Jesus through Joseph. Father Raymond Brown goes to great lengths to verify that Joseph's adoption of Jesus was sufficient to make the family connection and that the naming of Jesus by Joseph was sufficient to affirm his adoption. In spite of the traditional affirmation of the virginal conception of Jesus, the genealogical connection to Joseph seems to indicate that the Gospel writers knew little about biology and that their message was far more spiritual than physical.

Jesus is the royal son of David. The genealogy points to someone special, one who is the target for a long line of the faithful. Matthew is constant in proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven and identifying Jesus as King of the Jews. Jesus is

called "son of David" throughout his ministry: At the healing of the blind men in 9:27 and 20:30, they called out to him "son of David have mercy on us." At the curing of the demoniac in 12:23 the people asked, "Can this be the son of Dauid?" The Canaanite woman asking for help for her daughter in 15:22 pled, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." The Palm Sunday entrance to Jerusalem was blessed by the crowds with the shout, "Hosanna, son of David," and repeated throughout the week. The infant "king of the Jews" is a threat to Herod at birth and a threat to Pilate at his death.

But this long-expected Messiah with ties to royal David is also connected to women, outlaws, and ordinary people of God.

We are related to Jesus as the children of God. Most scholars today dismiss the genealogical lists as an accurate statement of family connection for Jesus. Rather they view the lists as serving distinct purposes in the historic identity of Jesus. Luke is particularly intense about the identity of Jesus with the poor and oppressed. His Jewish connection is less important than his tie to all humanity as the son of Adam. Matthew is the Jewish Gospel with the strong emphasis on Father Abraham and King David, but don't overlook the problem people in Matthew's list. He names four women with foreign connections. Martin Luther thought that Matthew was appealing to the genealogy as a means of inclusion of Gentiles in the saving work of Jesus. But a closer look, reveals women of questionable moral character, especially Rahab the harlot and Bathsheba the illicit wife of David. Raymond Brown observed a common experience of sexual scandal with Mary and Joseph. Rather than a reason to celebrate a miracle, Joseph's first response to Mary's pregnancy is a decision to end the relationship quietly. Only after the dream does Joseph decide to commit to Mary, thus, to Jesus to establish the integrity of the family.

We joke about the "black sheep" of our families. Some of us know for certain through genealogical discovery. Others harbor the nervous awareness that many of the original residents of the Colonies were sent here to serve out prison sentences. I find it absolutely amazing that Matthew touches the scandalous generations in the coming of Jesus. It may be like the baptism, that he wants to identify Jesus with sinners, but I suspect a larger purpose. No matter how carefully you narrow the definition of family, we come together as the children of God.

A couple of years ago, my sister-in-law gave my brother an unusual birthday gift. She had his DNA traced so that he could know who he was. He recently sent the report to me after several emails to let me know that it was coming. Finally the day arrived, and I made the unremarkable discovery that we shared DNA with the largest mass of humanity on the European Continent. We were not superhuman or unique beyond all question. Mostly we were related to all the rest of humankind.

Like all the rest of us, Jesus had a family that identified him with his community and pointed to his special place on the earth. Ultimately, however, he was one of us, identified with ordinary folks and even a few villains. His roots drew from all of the generations of Jews that preceded him in history. Finally he was a man sent from God.