

Romans 5:12-21; Luke 1:26-33; 3:23-38

December 6, 2015

Second Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

HUMANITY'S FAMILY TREE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Butch was my best friend in high school and college. He now lives in Basking Ridge, New Jersey and we keep in touch, mostly by e-mail. Butch is two years younger than I am — he is the little brother I never had and I'm the big brother he never had. His mom and dad were like second parents to me. Butch and I had a tradition which I still miss — we would spend the day together doing our Christmas shopping and then go out to eat pizza. Butch was one of my groomsmen in our wedding.

Butch's full name is Blucher Hamilton Cooper, IV. When he and Barbara announced they were going to have a baby boy, I wondered if there would be a Blucher Hamilton Cooper, V. Sure enough, Blucher V is now about twenty-three. I guess if he gets married and has a son, it will be up to Blucher and his wife whether or not there will be a Blucher Hamilton Cooper, VI.

For illustration purposes, I decided to estimate how far back you would have to go to get to the first Blucher Hamilton Cooper. For argument's sake, I estimated a generation to be twenty-five - thirty years. Since I know that Butch was born in 1958, that means Mr. Cooper (III) was born in the early 1930's. Blucher Junior must have been born shortly after the turn of the 20th century. That means the original Blucher Hamilton Cooper must have been born some time during the last quarter of the 19th century.

Will you join me for a casual research poll for just a minute?

How many of you can name your grandparents?

OK, keep your hands up. Now, how many of you can name your great-grandparents? Great-great-grandparents? Great-great-great-grandparents? [I don't know if I'll need to go any further than this.] Great-great-great-great-grandparents?

For a few years now, there have been commercials on TV for ancestry.com with interesting stories from people who learned their family histories. The website for ancestry.com advertises, "Give Family History for the Holidays. It's a gift as original as the person who opens it. Your loved ones will uncover their ethnic mix, discover distant relations, and find new details about their unique family history with this simple DNA test."

Recently there have been TV ads for "23andMe," a company that offers a service similar to ancestry.com. Once you submit your saliva sample, you will receive Ancestry reports. The website for this service says, "Your DNA comes from all of your ancestors. In your DNA, we can find genetic traces of where your ancestors lived throughout history. You also share DNA with people around the world today. You can choose to con-

nect with them through our database. You will continue to find new relatives as our database of more than one million customers grows over time. Reports include Ancestry Composition, Maternal & Paternal Lineage, Neanderthal, and DNA Relatives tool.” [I’m intrigued by the “Neanderthal” report!]

Imagine tracing your family tree through seventy-seven generations! That’s what Luke’s genealogy of Jesus does, with eleven sets of seven generations. We don’t know if there is any significance to that structure, but the theological significance of Jesus’ family tree is evident at the beginning and the end and throughout the genealogy. Surprisingly, Jesus’ family tree is important for us as well, those of us of whom it is has been said, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” (1 John 3:1) However, before we get too big-headed and boastful, we need to look at where Jesus’ family tree takes us.

They say the three most important questions a newcomer to a Southern town will be asked are (1) Where are you from? (2) What church do you go to? and (3) Who are your people? On Christmas Eve, we’ll hear Luke’s story about Joseph and Mary leaving Nazareth in the northern area of Galilee and traveling to Bethlehem in the southern region of Judah. I wonder if Joseph got asked those three questions when he showed up in Bethlehem with his very-pregnant wife. “I’m from Nazareth, up north . . . We go to synagogue in town . . . Well, my father was Heli . . .” In Luke’s Christmas story, we find out that Joseph “went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.” (Luke 2:4)

That’s what Jesus’ family tree sets out to prove — Jesus is, indeed, descended from the house and lineage of David. Maybe Luke used the 1st century A.D. equivalent of ancestry.com or 23andMe. Whatever his source, Luke leaves no question about who Jesus’ people are. He does use his editorial privilege in commenting that Jesus “was the son (as was thought) of Joseph, son of Heli . . .” Speaking as the father of two adopted children, I can testify to the family bond that is established by that court decree that says “adopted for life.” But it’s more than just a legal document that makes the child a part of the family — it’s a matter of the heart!

In some ways, Luke’s genealogy isn’t as interesting as the one Matthew uses to introduce his gospel. At the end of that family tree, Matthew point blank tells us the significance of his structure: “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.” (Matthew 1:17) Matthew’s genealogy supports his opening claim in chapter 1, verse 1 of his gospel: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Matthew traces Jesus’ family tree all the way back to Father Abraham and includes some of the biggest names in biblical history: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Boaz, Rahab, Ruth, Jesse, King David, Solomon the wife of Uriah, to name a few.

Luke’s genealogy has some of the same names — David, Jesse, Obed, Boaz, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. You won’t find another “Jesus” in the seventy-seven generations

of the family tree. However, Jesus' twenty-fifth great-grandfather, according to Luke, was named Joshua. The name "Jesus" is a common form of the name "Joshua." But it's kind of hard to believe that Joseph and Mary knew Joseph's ancestors' names back to the 29th generation to name their boy after him. However, Luke tells us exactly why Joseph and Mary called their boy "Jesus" — the angel, Gabriel, said to Mary, "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:31-33) When the eight-day old baby was presented in the Temple to be circumcised, "he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." (Luke 2:2:21)

Once Luke establishes that Jesus was not only in continuity with his Jewish heritage but had also fulfilled God's history with Israel, it seems Luke dug a little deeper into the family files because he includes another twenty generations or branches to the family tree of Jesus, all the way back to Adam — twenty-one generations if you include God! As someone has said, the family line runs from God, the father of Adam and thus all of humanity, to Jesus. In his report from his genealogical research, Luke is making it clear to all of us, Jesus stands in solidarity with **all** humankind. In a subtle kind of way, Jesus' family tree — humanity's family tree — backs up what the angel said to the shepherds in the field, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for **all the people**: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11, emphasis added)

By tracing Jesus' family tree all the way back to Adam, Luke reminds us that Jesus stands with us in our humanity. In fact, that's the promise and the glory of this season — "The Word became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14) Jesus is not the Messiah just for the Jews, despite his Jewish lineage of the house of David. Jesus is not the Savior just for those of us in the church. Jesus is not the Lord just of those who say they believe. Jesus is the Savior, the Son of the Most High, the Messiah, the Lord who came to and for **all the people**.

Just the other day, I read a post on FaceBook from someone who was reflecting on the events of the week, including the shootings in Colorado and California. The person wrote, "We've really messed up the whole free will thing. Sorry, God!" The apostle Paul wrote a lot about how we've really messed up the whole free will thing — "Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned." (Romans 5:12)

But, friends, the situation is not hopeless, precisely because of what we read in and learn from Jesus' family tree. Paul writes, "But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. . . If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift

of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:15, 17)

Geneticists and other scientists have identified what they call a “common ancestor” for all of humanity, based on DNA research. In an article entitled “Why humans are all much more related than you think,” Alisdair Wilkins writes, “When we get right down to it, we must face the truth that we’re all hopelessly inbred. It’s a question of basic mathematics — there simply aren’t enough ancestors to go around. Let’s say you were born in 1975, your parents were born in 1950, your four grandparents were born in 1925, your eight great-grandparents in 1900, and so on. In other words, your number of ancestors doubles every 25 years the further back in time you go. If you take this back just 1,000 years, you’ll find that you have well over 500 billion ancestors in a single generation. Considering there’s fewer than seven billion people on this planet — and even *that* is far, far more than any other point in human history — there’s something seriously wrong here. The solution, of course, is that you don’t have 500 billion *distinct* ancestors, but rather a much, much smaller number of ancestors reappear over and over and over again in your family tree.”¹

That may be somewhat unsettling to think about, but on the other hand, from a theological point of view, that’s what Jesus’ family tree makes clear. We’re all part of humanity’s family tree and Jesus is right there in the middle of the branches. To a certain extent, Luke concentrates on the Jewishness of Jesus’ family tree, but then he branches out (pun intended!) and back, all the way to Adam, all the way back to God the Father. Years ago, I heard Rev. David Walker say at a presbytery meeting, “If God is our Father, that means you and I are brothers and sisters.” The implications and responsibilities and possibilities of those relationships are challenging and awe-inspiring and hopeful.

I doubt ancestry.com or “23andMe” will ever be able to trace our roots all the way back seventy-seven generations, much less all the way back to Adam. However, what our modern DNA science is showing us, Luke already demonstrates in this genealogy of Jesus. Maybe you’ve heard it said that there is only one race, ***the human race***. Again, the implications and responsibilities and possibilities are boundless, especially in this divided world in which we live.

But thanks be to God this Advent season, who promised and sent his only Son, our brother who makes us brothers and sisters and children of God. Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ, who binds us all together in the human family. Thanks be to God for his gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

NOTES ¹Alasdair Wilkins, “Why humans are more related than you think,” at www.io9.com.

Let us pray: God of grace, ever faithful to your promises, the earth rejoices in hope of our Savior’s coming and looks forward with longing to his return at the end of time. Prepare our hearts to receive him when he comes, for he is Lord forever and ever. Amen.