

**CHILDREN OF GOD**

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

Beatrice Evans was a much beloved member of the Stanley White Presbyterian Church in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. She was that congregation's Eleanor Walker. Everyone called her "Be-at." Beat knew her Bible inside and out. One day she said to me, "Phil, I'd like for you to preach a sermon on Matthew 1:1-17. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon preached on those verses." In case you don't know those verses, they contain Matthew's version of the "begats" – "Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren." [I can remember as a kid deciding to read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, only to get bogged down in Genesis 4, 5, 11 with all of the "begats."]

I had never preached on Matthew 1:1-17, or any other genealogy for that matter, so I took Beat up on her challenge. On December 22, 1996 I preached a sermon called "Why Not Joseph, Jr.?" based on Jesus' family tree in the first chapter of Matthew. Actually, I remember very much enjoying working on that sermon and discovering what Matthew's message was in that genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Today we heard Luke's genealogy of Jesus, the ancestors of Jesus, seventy-seven generations, mostly people we don't know anything about, except that their names are listed in Jesus' family tree. You might have recognized some of the more famous names as I read through that list – Joseph, David, Jesse, Boaz, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, Noah, Methusaleh, Adam, and God. But that leaves sixty-six names of Jesus' ancestors that we don't really know much about. Actually, I think that's kind of significant for understanding who Jesus is and why he came to earth.

Family trees are interesting, aren't they? My brother, David in New Orleans, is pretty much the family historian. I texted him the other day and asked if he had our family history saved on his computer so he could email it to me. He called me and said that was his big project for the next two years now that he is retired, but he was sorry, he couldn't send me anything. Then he started talking about the pictures, papers, and letters he has collected on both sides of the family – the Gladdens and the Strahans. For instance, he told me about Neil McCollum, an ancestor of my mother through her father's family. David described a letter Neil McCollum had written home to Louisiana during the Civil War. He was stationed in the panhandle of Florida and wrote about the dire conditions of the camp. He also worried they were going to be sent to "Tennsee" after the first of the year. Neil McCollum didn't want to go to "Tennsee," because he would be even farther away from home, and he didn't feel good about it. Sure enough, Neil McCollum went to "Tennsee" and was killed in the battle of Chattanooga.

Anyway, family trees are interesting, with their twists and turns and knots and bumps. When I called my grandfather in New Orleans and told him I was going to seminary, that dyed-in-the wool, Presbyterian elder and clerk of session said, “We’ve never had a preacher in the family before. But you know what they say . . . if you look back far enough in anybody’s family tree, you’ll find a preacher and a horse thief!” I didn’t know if I had been complimented or not – then my grandfather laughed and said, “I’m happy for you!” But his words are probably true – you can find all sorts of characters in family trees.

That’s one of the interesting things about the genealogies of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke. Neither one of them has been cleaned up for publication. The skeletons in the closet are there for everybody to see. In a sense, that’s something we have in common with Jesus and he with us, as I talked about in last Sunday’s sermon. Woven in with kings and leaders of God’s people and prophets, you can read about less stellar ancestors and people who are pretty much anonymous. And yet, that doesn’t take away from the importance of Jesus’ family tree and its meaning for his life and the meaning for our faith.

You see, while Matthew traces Jesus as far back as Abraham, Luke takes us all the way back to the beginning, to Adam and ultimately to God himself. The two genealogies have a deep theological purpose for the gospel writers, even more than any historical purpose. Matthew is intent on demonstrating that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophecies. That doesn’t mean Matthew thinks Jesus came only for the Jews, but that is the emphasis in his gospel.

But Luke paints a different portrait by tracing Jesus’ roots all the way back to Adam. Luke’s gospel is, in the words of the angel to the shepherds out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night, “good news of great joy for all the people.” And, in fact, Luke’s gospel plays out that message, as we read the stories of the outcasts and the marginalized, the women and Samaritans and lepers and tax collectors and prodigals, responding to Jesus’ invitation to salvation. And we can continue that story right on into our day – in a very real sense, we are included in that family tree, ordinary people like you and me.

So, let’s think about that question, “Why not Joseph, Jr.?” My father’s name was Addley Hogan Gladden, Jr. Actually he was “III.” His grandfather was named after his own uncle, General Adley Hogan Gladden, who was killed in the Battle of Shiloh in “Tennsee” in April 1862. My mom told me once that when she was pregnant with my big brother, she worried about having to name him Addley Hogan Gladden IV, but she didn’t want to be the one to break the line. She said when she woke up in her hospital bed after delivering my brother, she found a telegram from her mother-in-law. The telegram said, “Welcome to David Addley Gladden!” My mom said she was relieved that my dad had signed the birth certificate!

So names are important! Why not Joseph, Jr.? After all, in that list of seventy-seven ancestors, that distinguished name of Joseph appears three times. It’s not quite as famous as David or Isaac or Jacob or Abraham, but Joseph appears more often in the list than any other name. But you know the answer to the question, “Why not Joseph, Jr.?” Because the angel Gabriel told his parents to name him Jesus, and that’s what they did when they dedicated him in the temple eight days after he was born. If

you cross-check with Matthew 1:21, you find out from the angel that “she will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” And so he did – and so he does – Jesus/Joshua/God saves/salvation!

Here in the South, as you well know, especially if you have moved here from somewhere else, you’re most likely to be asked by someone who is meeting you for the first time, “Who are your people?” That’s a way to get a handle on who you are, to start building a relationship. When we began our ministry at the Littleton Presbyterian Church up in Halifax County, in a town of about eight hundred people, the distinguished retired bank president and church elder pulled me aside and said, “Littleton is a small town. Don’t ever say anything bad about anybody to anybody. The person you’re talking to is probably related to them.” I thought that was good advice. Then Robert said, “And don’t ever say anything good about anybody.” I must have looked puzzled, because he said, “The person you’re talking to might be mad at that other person and then get mad at you.” He could only keep from laughing for so long! I guess he took pity on me as I was trying to figure out how to relate to the people in Littleton, North Carolina.

What I’m trying to say is, Luke’s family tree tells us something important about being children of God. In a sense, we can all trace our roots back to “child of Adam, child of God.” But even more important than that is the family relationship we have with Jesus Christ, our brother in the faith. We heard Geneva read these wonderful words from 1 John 3: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. . . Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” (1 John 3:1-2)

The apostle Paul makes the same point in his letter to the Christians in Galatia: “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:26-29)

Luke’s family tree of Jesus links Jesus back through King David (in fulfillment of the promise), all the way back to Adam. And if we look at how the line runs the other way, Luke tells us that Jesus’ family line runs from God, the father of Adam, through all of humanity, down to Jesus, who stands in solidarity with all humankind, including you and me, regular, ordinary people.

And those family ties are so important. There’s an interesting, if not somewhat troubling, story about Jesus and his family in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. Jesus was at home when some people in the crowd told him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you.” Jesus looked at all of the people sitting around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:31-35; Matthew 12:46-50)

That sounds like a pretty harsh story, doesn’t it? But Jesus is talking about the family ties that bind us together as brothers and sisters in Christ, that tie us to the family tree of faith that goes all the way back to Adam, all the way back to God. And

those family ties should make a difference in how we live and act, if we remember our family roots in Jesus Christ.

Several years ago, Rev. David Walker, who was the general presbyter of Coastal Carolina Presbytery, was preaching at a meeting in Burgaw. I wrote down what he said in my quote journal: “If God is our Father, then you are my family.” That is an important reminder from this family tree of Jesus in Luke 3. The family of faith expands our own list of ancestors and our family tree includes Jesus – Savior – son of David – son of Adam – Son of God – and our fellow believers in Christ and all of the people Jesus died on the cross for.

I remember my mom and dad telling me as I walked out the door many times, “Remember who you are and where you come from.” I really like the margin note next to the scripture lessons in this morning’s bulletin, the quote from Alex Haley: “In all of us there is a hunger, marrow deep, to know our heritage. To know who we are and where we have come from.”

And remember what Max Lucado has said, “To call yourself a child of God is one thing. To be called a child of God by those who watch your life is another thing altogether.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us remember who we are and where we have come from: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

***Let us pray: We thank you, O God for your love for us that we should be called children of God: love that reaches out to accept us, wherever we are, whoever we are. Help us, your people, held within the security of your love, to risk showing that same love to others. May our love be known for its abundance and grace. May others know we are your children by the love we share. Amen.***