

Sermon for May 19, 2019

“Testing our DNA”

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Staunton Church of the Brethren

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DNA ancestry tests are hot right now. Spit in a cup and learn about your family tree. Becky got a kit as a present for Christmas this past year. She sent it in and got a report that was pretty much in line with what she already knew. She knows a lot about her ancestry because her father published a family magazine for about 15 years, researching family stories and ancestry. It was the “Rathbun – Rathbone – Rathburn Family Historian.” Did you know that the soldier who was at the theatre with President Lincoln the night he was shot was Major Henry Reed Rathbun? That’s Becky’s maiden name - Rathbun. So the Ancestry.com didn’t do much for her but confirm her father’s many years of research.

But what about you? Have you jumped into your gene pool? From the comfort of your own home, you can use DNA services such as 23andMe, Family Tree DNA, AncestryDNA or Living DNA. More and more people want to know who they are, where their ancestors came from and whether they have any fascinating or mysterious relatives. "Thanks to scientific breakthroughs over the last few years," says a website called *Exploring Life's Mysteries* (March 6, 2017), "you can now fill in more of your ancestry puzzle than ever before." Just order a DNA test kit online, take it yourself and mail it in to get your individual report. You may uncover exciting facts about your family background, or discover that your ancestors are not the people you thought they were.

When 140 people with the last name Kincaid shared their DNA test results on the Internet, they discovered that their ancestors included war heroes and survivors of the Irish potato famine. They also found liars and two-timers. Two brothers, for example, were surprised to discover that they had different fathers. They confronted their elderly mother, who said that she had never been unfaithful to her husband. She also denied the possibility

that one of the two boys were adopted. Says Don Kincaid, who witnessed the ordeal of these two brothers, "It has been traumatic for some to discover their true lineage through the DNA tests." So think twice before you do it. Make sure you can handle whatever comes.

Fortunately for us, the book of Genesis contains reliable and important information about our ancestors in the faith, Abraham and Sarah. The family tree is not always clear, since the two undergo name changes, with Abram becoming Abraham and Sarai becoming Sarah. They were not morally perfect people, by any stretch. Sarah laughed when the Lord predicted that she would have a son in her old age, and then she denied to God that she had laughed (18:9-15). Abraham told a lie to King Abimelech of Gerar, describing Sarah as his sister. Fortunately, God intervened and told the king the truth before he crossed the line with this married woman (20:1-7). Abraham and Sarah were not perfect people by any means and were certainly guilty of stretching the truth. Yet, despite their imperfections, God used this husband and wife to become ancestors of "a multitude of nations" (v. 4). The three great monotheistic faiths -- Judaism, Christianity and Islam -- are all considered Abrahamic faiths, with a shared family tree. Our moral, ethical and spiritual lives would be greatly impoverished if we did not have Abraham and Sarah in our ancestry.

For us, the Bible is a kind of "23andAbraham" DNA service. It establishes a link between us and this couple, and teaches us who we are as people of faith. In particular, it proves that we are part of a covenant relationship with God.

So, what does this mean -- covenant? We talked about this last Sunday in our Inquirers' Class. Abraham and Sarah were covenant people. Henri Nouwen describes it this way: "When God makes a covenant with us, God says: "I will love you with an everlasting love. I will be faithful to you, even when you run away from me, reject me or betray me." In our society we don't speak much about covenants; we speak about contracts. When we make a contract with a person, we say: "I will fulfill my part as long as you fulfill yours. When you don't live up to your promises, I no longer have to live up to mine." Contracts are often broken because the partners are unwilling or unable to be faithful to their terms. But God didn't make a contract with us; God made a covenant with us, and God wants our relationships with one another to

reflect that covenant. That's why marriage, friendship, life in community are all ways to give visibility to God's faithfulness in our lives together.

God's covenant with Abraham begins when the Lord says, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous" (vv. 1-2). God promises to be in relationship with Abraham and make him the father of many. In response, Abraham is asked to walk before God and be blameless.

The good news is that God is faithful to the covenant, staying close to Abraham and making him "the ancestor of a multitude of nations" (v. 4). God changes Abram's name because the name Abraham means "father of a multitude." This covenant is an "everlasting covenant," which is good news for Abraham, and for all of us as well. Abraham did not succeed in being blameless in his actions, nor can we succeed in achieving such a standard of perfection. But God is faithful even when we are not, and makes the promise, "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (v. 7). Being people of the covenant is a key part of our "ancestry puzzle." It tells us who we are ... now and always.

As covenant people, we are in a relationship with a God who always acts first. Did you notice that God took the initiative in the covenant with Abraham, saying, "I will make my covenant between me and you" (v. 2). God acted before Abraham did anything, and this is true in God's relationship with us in every time and place and situation. God is always at work even before we know that God is acting, paving the path for us in ways that will heal us and help us. Theologians call this "prevenient grace," meaning the grace of God that comes before any human decision. In his book, *The Silver Chair*, C.S. Lewis tells the story of a lion named Aslan, who can be thought of as a symbol for Jesus Christ. In the book, Aslan hears two children calling to him for help, and after rescuing them he says, "You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you." That's prevenient grace, the grace that comes before.

We call to God because God has been calling to us. God always acts first. Because God offers us forgiveness, we ask for forgiveness. Because Jesus is a healer, we pray for healing.

Because the Spirit has been moving since the first day of creation, we ask for the Spirit to fill us today. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them," says John. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:16, 19). God's love comes first -- prevenient grace.

As people in covenant with God, then, we can see the entire Bible as the story of promise-based relationships. God first makes a covenant with Noah (6:18), and then with Abram (15:18). When God hears the groaning of the people of Israel in Egypt, he remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 2:24). God speaks with Moses on Mount Sinai, and gives him two tablets of the covenant, the Ten Commandments (Exodus 31:18). After the Israelites enter the Promised Land, the angel of the Lord says, "I will never break my covenant with you" (Judges 2:1).

Unfortunately, the people of Israel break their side of the deal, over and over again. "They have broken my covenant," says God through the prophet Hosea, "and transgressed my law" (Hosea 8:1). So, God promises through Jeremiah to "make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31). This new covenant comes to life in Jesus, who offers his own body and blood on the cross to show us exactly how much God loves us. At the Last Supper, Jesus gives his disciples the cup and says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). The letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is "the guarantee of a better covenant" (Hebrews 7:22).

When we focus on covenant, we learn that God is always faithful, even when we are not. Hallelujah! God never breaks this faithful and loving relationship, even though we often fall into faithlessness.

The good news of the Bible is that we are covenant people, with an ancestry that goes back to the everlasting covenant that God made with Abram. When we use the "23andAbraham" DNA service, we discover that our promise-based relationship with God is stronger than any human failings. We can build our lives on the foundation of the old and new covenants, and trust that "neither death, nor life ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Our covenant with God proves that we really are a part of God's family. We have covenantal DNA. God shows us the same kind of unconditional love that a good parent shows a child. Children are going to misbehave, as we all know, but good parents remain loving and faithful -- even when their nerves are frayed. No matter what children do or say, the link between good parents and children are going to remain in place. That's the attitude that God has toward us, even when we act like rebellious teenagers. God loves us unconditionally, just as God has loved us humans throughout history. The everlasting covenant started with Abraham, and it continues with everyone who is a member of God's family, because of the gift of Jesus the Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen.