

“Our Spiritual Family Tree”

Romans 8:14-17

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I am a very amateur genealogist. My journey into genealogy started shortly after my grandmother died in 2001. I was curious about the history of my family, so I bought a software package called Family Tree Maker, and I started doing a little bit of research into my ancestry.

What will I find? I have to admit that whenever I spend time working on my family tree, I have this hope that I'll find something really amazing. I want to figure out what elements of American history my family might have been a part of. Did any of my family members fight in the Civil or Revolutionary Wars? When did they immigrate to the United States? Could they have been on the Mayflower?

As I think about it, I guess a part of what I'm really hoping for is a sense of importance or significance. I'm hoping to find something important or significant about my family so that I can be connected to that, and maybe feel a little more important or significant myself. Here's what I have found in my limited research.

Just last year, I was able to find some information on my Great-Great-Great-Grandfather, Dr. John Allen. He was born in 1810 and lived most of his adulthood in central Illinois. I found a book online that was written in 1879 that detailed the history of the county he lived in. In that book, it said “Dr. Allen was a thorough Christian gentleman, and stood very high in the medical profession. It was through the influence of Dr. Allen that the first Sunday School and first temperance society were formed.”¹ I also found that he was the founder of one of the churches in Petersburg, IL.

One of my ancestors founded a church! That's pretty cool information for me, especially as someone who has devoted their life to ministry. I finally found someone in my family tree that is in some way connected to the ministry. Can I confess to you my disappointment that it was a Presbyterian church? Man! Just imagine how cool it would have been for me if he had founded a Methodist church! Anyway, that church is still going, and, believe it or not, according to their church website, one of the adult fellowship groups is still called the “Dr. John Allen Fellowship Group.”²

As cool as that information is to me, I found something even better. After attending Dartmouth Medical School, and before moving to Petersburg, Dr. Allen moved to the little village of Salem, Illinois. While he was in Salem, he developed a friendship with a young lawyer in town. That young lawyer? Abraham Lincoln. Whoa! Now we're getting somewhere. Someone in my family actually played a part in making Abraham Lincoln who he was. My family member is

¹ “History of Menard & Mason Counties, Illinois” (Chicago: O.L. Baskin & Co., 1879), p. 203-4.

² <http://www.central-pres.org/history.htm>, accessed 5/22/10.

recorded in the history books right next to Abraham Lincoln. That makes me feel pretty good. That makes me feel like my family was pretty important, and therefore I must have some additional amount of importance about me too, right?

My interest in genealogy drew me to a TV series that started this winter on NBC called “Who Do You Think You Are?” In each episode of the series, a different celebrity tracks elements of their family history. Some of the stories have been really powerful. Lisa Kudrow found out that her grandmother was killed by the Nazis in Poland, and she went back to the place where it happened. Emmitt Smith traced his relatives back through the slave trade to the original African villages of his ancestors. Matthew Broderick discovered that his grandfather was recognized as a war hero during World War I, and he went to the battlefield near Atlanta where his great-great grandfather died during the Civil War. Brooke Shields discovered that her lineage extends back directly to the kings of France in the 1500’s.

It was powerful to see the looks in the eyes of these celebrities as they learned of their roots. Matthew Broderick said at one point in his episode “It’s like there’s something different in your being than what you always thought. Something has been filled in that I didn’t know was blank.”

Today, we celebrate Heritage Sunday in our denomination. It’s a day when we remember our own spiritual family tree. It’s a day when we pause to celebrate and claim our ancestry in the faith. Today, we’re celebrating and remembering by singing some of the favorite hymns of Methodists and Wesleyans throughout the ages. In this, we’re claiming that part of our spiritual DNA that makes us find significance in our singing of hymns.

Heritage Sunday is the Sunday nearest to May 24. Why May 24? It’s because John Wesley, the founder of our denomination, had a significant spiritual experience on May 24, 1738. Listen to the words he wrote in his Journal about that experience.

“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”³

He was 34 years old at the time. He was already a priest in the Church of England. He had already organized the Methodist movement. And yet, there was something missing in his life. It was if his faith made that 12-inch journey from his head down to his heart. All of those things that he had learned about faith came alive in his life, and he discovered a sense of assurance that the promises of God were true, not just in some existential way, but that they were true for him. He understood in a new way God’s love, not just for humanity, but also specifically for

³ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xvi.html>, accessed 5/22/10.

him. It was a transformational day in his life, and we celebrate it still today, because John Wesley is part of our family tree. Who he was in many ways shapes who we are today.

In our scripture text today, Paul has some things to say about our spiritual family tree. He begins by saying that if we are led by the Spirit of God, we are, therefore, children of God. And if we are children of God, what does that make us? Heirs! Heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ. When we trace our family tree, when we do our genealogical research, who do we find at the top of our tree? God!

We throw around the idea that we are all God's children all the time, and I wonder if we really claim the fullness of what that means? What would life be like if we laid claim to our true heritage?

Imagine you're mapping your family tree. You start with your grandparents. Maybe you know something about your great-grandparents, so you add that in. You have to do a little more research to trace the generations farther back. And then you stumble upon a resource that uncovers something amazing. It's absolutely incredible. According to this resource, you can lay claim to the fact that you are connected to the creator of the universe. Gone is any idea that there's nothing significant about your family, and there's nothing significant about you. Like Brooke Shields, we find that we are all connected to royalty, only our connection is to the King of Kings.

This means, as Paul says, that we are heirs. The invitation to Christian discipleship this morning is to lay claim to our inheritance. Lay claim to the reality that we are part of God's family tree. It's an invitation to say, like Matthew Broderick did that there's something different in our being than what we always thought. Something has been filled in that we didn't know was blank. It's an invitation to have your heart "strangely warmed" because you are a part of God's family and all of God's promises are true, not just for all of humanity but also for you and for me. We are invited to lay claim to all of the promises of God as our inheritance from our father. Let us do so this day. Amen.