

Discerning One's Spiritual DNA

John 17:20-26

I am, like our pets at home, an inglorious mutt. My pedigree is far from perfect, my papers altogether nonexistent—not at all like those with a purebred lineage from generation to generation from the republic of Noank, or any other single country, social class, or ethnic population. No one in my ancestry (as far as I can tell) worried about bloodline or homogeneity; they produced offspring mainly by accident or for utilitarian purposes: to serve as farmhands, millworkers, or as choir boys.

As a result, I consist of a little bit of this and a dash or two of that. My mother was cast from Norwegian clay, while my father's roots are Scottish and Irish. How far back either one of those lines goes is anyone's guess. Nevertheless, this combined North Sea heritage explains why I comfortably grew up in Maine and now make my home facing the coldest winds and water along the Connecticut shore. I can handle it because, like most Nordic children, I was born with an insulating layer of whale blubber under my skin and from my mother's womb I was wrapped in Irish sweaters. To this day, the salt and seal oil of the North Sea clog every one of my arteries.

A few years ago, though, I thought I'd explore this otherwise undiscovered family tree. I purchased a subscription to Ancestry.com and away I went—following every leaf and hint with unrelenting zeal. For me, it was like a game—find the matching names and build a family. I enthusiastically grafted my family tree together until it grew to the size of a sequoia, without investigating the finer details of the leads or the veracity of my sources. When I realized that a third of my connections were anachronistic (meaning they couldn't have been related since they didn't exist in the same centuries or even countries!), along with the disappointing

recognition that most of my forebears were largely “white trash,” I grew weary of looking at leaves and lists and ended my subscription and forgot all about it.

However, in recent years, the marketplace has become far more sophisticated in its genealogical offerings. Incorporating the science of gene mapping and DNA coding, anyone can spend some hard earned cash to learn who they are actually related to and who is responsible for their receding hairline, chronic ailments, and annoying eccentricities. What we are discovering is that each of us are as unique as the genetic predispositions we inherit—meaning, we are all manifestations of the hereditary material from our forebears which, in the final analysis, makes us all “mutts.”

What I’ve come to learn is that it’s not just Ancestry.com that offers the definitive proof of one’s family’s past; there are all sorts of ways that DNA mapping can provide statistical information about your ethnic composition, where your ancestors lived, who they married, who they conquered and pillaged, or what diseases they contracted for their descendants’ benefit. One can get a mitochondrial DNA test that maps the maternal line, or the YDNA that tracks the paternal one. Or one can take the autosomal DNA test that is gender neutral, which explores the traits beyond sex that determine why you are who you are.

There are four main marketers of DNA testing for the general population: Ancestry.com, Family Tree DNA, 23andMe, and National Geographic, which for a \$200 fee and a three-year subscription to their magazine, will provide a genome map that will help locate your particular DNA on the animal food chain. Should you have “buyer beware” jitters, you can go to Wikipedia (the source of all incontrovertible information) and do

comparison shopping with the help of the International Society of Genetic Genealogy, which will guide you into spending all of your hard-earned money to find out what you probably don't want to discover about your past.

Why are people so interested in testing their DNA for genealogical purposes? Some of it is just curiosity; people just are interested to find out if they're related to someone famous. Some are doing it for purposes of identification—perhaps an upgrade from the standard paternity test, or to explore racial or ethnic influences. Others are compelled to do it to find potential medical conditions or predispositions to certain diseases that might run through family lines.

Of course, none of this DNA mapping reveals much about the essence of who we are as individual persons. DNA science cannot explain who we are psychologically, morally, or spiritually because much of those determinants occur to us over the course of our own lifetimes; it's not predetermined by those to whom we are biologically related.

The distinction can be illustrated somewhat by the difference between a car and its driver. You can judge the quality of a particular automobile by its make and model and manufacturing lineage. But you do not know how well the car will run or hold up over time until you consider who is maintaining and driving the car. The operator will often make all the difference, regardless of how good the car is coming off the dealer lot.

In a similar way, who we are as individuals is determined more by the manner in which we conduct and manage our lives than from all the influence that biology and nurturing may have on us. We see that frequently in how different siblings can be by how they choose to live their lives. Their family DNA is nearly identical, their primary nurturing may be

similar as well; but siblings often turn out quite different in regard to personality type, interests, moral aptitude, life experiences, social relationships, professional choices, and other factors that give shape to who they are. Even though similarity exists as far as heredity goes, what each individual does with his or her life often overshadows the primal forces inherent to biology.

Thus, the more revealing exploration might not be found through DNA testing, per se, but by considering who or what the primary influences are upon our individual lives. For the sake of semantics, let's call this our "spiritual DNA." Who, for instance, have been our mentors in life—those who taught or modelled the values we uphold or believe in, or who provided a vision of who we might be or encouraged ambitions in us that we pursued?

Or, on the other hand, what traumas or wonderful opportunities made their impact on our life, positively or negatively, perhaps taking us in a direction that altered the course of our lives? Who are the primary influences upon our thinking, our outlook, our ability to make sense of life? Who or what offers the wisdom and moral resources we depend upon for interpreting situations and choosing right from wrong? Is there an ideology we subscribe to, a meaningful spiritual perspective that guides us in our decision-making?

To put all of this into computer jargon: what we are as a person is not just about the hardware. Who or what programmed, or continues to program, our operating system? It's the software that counts—that largely determines the ultimate use and value of the hardware. That's true of life, as well. So what operating system do you subscribe to? What enables you to run to your peak ability?

When I think about that for myself, I recognize there are many influences upon me as an individual. But the two I cherish most are the influence of my parents and that of my dear love, Wendy. On a personal level, in terms of how I perceive and process things on a daily basis, those three have influenced me over the course of time more than any other people in my entire life. Then I could go on to recognize certain theologians and spiritual mentors, various clergy over the years, my brothers, other relatives, and the like—people who have walked alongside me for my entire life or only a part of it who left their mark on me. I cannot be who I am today without them.

In the same manner, I can reflect on times and troubles that have shaped my life with circumstances that wounded me, or caused me to act poorly, or still haunt me with regret and sadness within my heart. But in counterbalance, I also recall highlights from extraordinary experiences and unusual opportunities and accomplishments that I could never replicate or take for granted.

Certainly, as a person of faith, I would not be who I am without acknowledging the importance of Jesus' teachings in particular, and the fundamental belief and trust I have in my awareness of God's providential love and ultimate mercy for me. Everything I experience in life is somehow integrated into my sense of spirituality. All of these influences are part of my spiritual DNA. This is who I am—a product of many influences that have supported, challenged, corrected, or enhanced my intuitive sense about myself and the life I lead. My musings likely echo the sentiments of many of you gathered here as you reflect on your own lives.

In a similar vein, this is how I view our lectionary text for today from John's Gospel—a portion of John's portrayal of Jesus waxing philosophical

about his own spiritual DNA, as it were. As John presents it, Jesus is praying for the unity of the church as it moves forward—something that became evidently clear by John’s writings sixty or more years following Jesus’ death and resurrection. By that point, there were differing branches of Christianity already budding forth, as there had been during the Apostolic times with Peter, Paul, James, John, and others defining for the early churches what it meant to be a part of the Jesus movement. As often happens, when there is diversity among people, along with spiritual conviction, there’s a tendency to become rivals for the truth. In a manner of speaking, it was more like a sibling rivalry than anything else.

But the appeal Jesus made in this context is to the unity of their relationships, not uniformity of belief, perspective, experience, or creed, as it would later become. The appeal was based on the spiritual oneness that Jesus experienced with God—a relational tie of influence, mutual love, and agreement. His biological heredity wasn’t what mattered (even though that’s how he was most commonly known, as the son of Joseph or Mary); instead, Jesus’ sense of himself was based on his spiritual DNA with Israel’s God and, presumably, certain prophets, rabbis, and even John the Baptizer, who influenced his worldview. Jesus’ beliefs, outlook, values, priorities, sense of purpose, relationships, and destiny were intentionally shaped by his relationship with the Lord and those he encountered throughout his life. That’s how he would be known, distinct from his family tree in Nazareth.

Since, in biblical times, genealogy played a large role in framing people’s identity and self-worth (as we can see by the genealogical lists recorded in the Bible), it was no small statement for Jesus to claim, then, that his real spiritual roots were in his relationship with God. This became a testy point of conflict with his own family, as we often see in the Gospels.

But the proof of his spiritual heritage was in how Jesus interpreted and perceived the presence of God and how his spiritual sensibilities were reflected in his life and, in turn, how his followers would choose to do the same. Their personal sense of identity and purpose evolved from being initially tied to their own clan or family tree into their developing relationship with Jesus and, later, his Spirit and teachings. They might have even traced their familial roots back to one of the twelve tribes of Israel, or for that matter, back to Abraham, but it would prove little more than an accident of nature if they didn't reflect the Spirit, values, and vision of Israel's God. The Lord, YHWH, was doing a new thing in Jesus' proclamation, and their sense of identity and self—their spiritual DNA—was to be found in Jesus and his ministry and teachings. That's how they would come to be known. That's how they would come to know themselves.

What does this mean for us? Let me put it this way. If you grew up in a home where your mother is, or was, a person of faith, it's likely a good place to begin discerning your spiritual DNA, if you haven't already done that. Memories may help you express gratitude in the way she taught you the lessons of life, a moral outlook shaped by the teachings of Jesus—perhaps even here in this place. If so, then there is a continuity you can appreciate between the genetic influences upon your life and the spiritual ones that have come to mean much to you and others. That unity is pretty special when you think about it. It's no small matter to be able to see continuity between the love of God through the love of your parents, as I and others can attest. That's a gift that has priceless value in your life.

Should that not be the case, then you will likely note times where you have faced conflicted choices in life, or struggled with priorities, or had relationships that created a dissonance with the values you may have

acquired in your upbringing and what you've discovered in your own spiritual journey. The difference in values may be evident in how you treat others, how much you are able to express mercy and forgiveness, or in who your mentors are or what you lionize and follow in your daily world. Spiritual continuity is sometimes evident and sometimes not.

Yet, the Gospel's plea is for each of us to recognize where our spiritual roots best lie—to discern them as best we can—in the value system and vision for the world where relationships are held sacred, where spiritual values matter more than material ones, where service to others is the highest ambition, and where justice for the least of these is far more important than aggrandizing the great. For this is evidence of the spiritual heritage of Jesus and his followers. Knowing who we are is largely based on what we value, as well as how much we embody and express and uphold what we value.

On this special day, of course, we are fortunate to have the opportunity to express love and gratitude to our mothers, whether in person or in spirit. It's a good moment for each of us to reflect upon and discern our spiritual roots. If your spiritual DNA comes from your mother as much as your life did from her womb, then it's heartfelt appreciation expressed to the one who helped you first see the face of Jesus, who carried you in her arms, who taught you how to behave, who had your back when you had to stand your ground, who corrected you when you were wrong, who picked you up when you had fallen, and who mercifully holds you dear in her heart throughout life with the same unconditionally resilient love as God.

Should that be true, if there is such unity in your love for your mother and God, then you are a fortunate and blessed person. In that recognition

alone, you already know who you are—you've already discerned your spiritual DNA—from wherever your family roots may have come. Know that as a blessing and call it good. Remember, if each of us can know and experience God's love, it most likely comes from the one who loved us first.

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