
Jesus, Not Ashamed to Call Us Sisters and Brothers

**An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Second Sunday in Lent – Year B**

"Mommy, Mommy," said the little girl to her mother. "I was at school and the teacher told us that we're descended from apes." She was learning her lesson about evolution and she went on to say, "But at Sunday school, the teacher taught us that we're created by God; a little lower than the angels. So I went and asked Daddy and Daddy said, 'Honey, your teacher is right. We are descended from apes.' Mommy, mommy, what do you say?" And the mother said to her little girl, "It's okay, dear. He's talking about his side of the family." Ha!

Well, I've been thinking about being concerned about our genealogies because of today's scriptures. And even at the end of the gospel, you recall that Jesus said,

"Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation of them, the son of man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his father with the holy angels." (Mark 8:38)

So I've been thinking about shame and being ashamed of one's background or lineage or pedigree or genealogy. And I remember this scripture from the letter to the Hebrews where the writer says, "For the one who is holy and makes us holy, we all have one Father. For this reason, Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters" (Hebrews 2:11).

What is this thing about being ashamed that we have whereby we come to the Lord and hear a word of release from that? I was struck by our Lenten hymn at the beginning [of the service]. Remember that last verse? "I have a sin of fear that when I've spun my last thread, I shall perish on the shore, swear by Thyself that at my death, thy Son shall shine as he shines now and heretofore." ("Wilt Thou Forgive that Sin," The Hymnal, No. 140; John Donne poem; *Donne* melody, John Hilton).

So that's the word—the comfortable word, the welcoming word—we want to hear from an infinite source; an absolute word of welcome, in a kind and friendly universe, with nothing to be ashamed of. I've been thinking about shame all week as I've prepared to talk with you tonight, and I came across this news story: "How White Supremacists Respond When DNA Says They're Not White" (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/white-supremacists-respond-genetics-say-theyre-not-white>). And it got my attention because I've been surveilling issues of shame in the world around me. And the article goes on to say that to belong to these white supremacist networks online, you have to prove your DNA. What is your ethnic profile?

You have to test positive as a pure blood European. What happens when that doesn't turn out right? The word that the DNA companies use is "admixture." What happens when your admixture is not right? What kind of shame is that? The article goes on to talk about having compassion; not trying to talk anyone out of being a white supremacist, but have compassion for the kind of shame that people carry around where they have to do something about their background in order to feel good about themselves; to have self-esteem.

And the next article I saw had to do with African-Americans. You know the program on television, "Finding Your Roots" by the African-American scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Finding Your Roots." All kinds of folks come on that show, Black, white, celebrities, ordinary folks. [Fact check: "ordinary folks" is incorrect.] "Finding Your Roots." And Gates helps them [research] their background. Very interesting. While he was on a public broadcasting program about finding his own roots, this is what he said.

"When they did my admixture, I'm 50% Sub-Saharan African and 50% European and virtually no Native American ancestry, which really pisses my family off." What is this thing we African-Americans have about having to have Native American ancestry? Just something that will make us not just European and African. The

scholar Alondra Nelson, an African-American scholar, calls it 'genealogical aspirations.' We have aspirational genealogies.

Regarding our scriptures today, about Abraham and his lineage, we claim along with our Muslim and Jewish sisters and brothers that we are Abrahamic people; descended from Abraham by faith as a source of pride and a connection to the holy and the divine. Whenever I talk about Abraham in this national context of our issues, I think about Father Abraham; that other Father Abraham, Abraham Lincoln, who famously talked about his looks and made fun of himself. He was said to have a homely face. Once a woman came up to him and said, "For land's sake, you are the homeliest man I ever saw." And he responded, "Yes ma'am, but I can't help that." Then he added, "But I suppose you might stay at home;" inviting her not to continue her conversation about his looks.

In a debate he was once called a two-faced liar; in a public debate, a political debate. And he joked, "I leave it to my audience: If I had another face, do you think I'd wear this one?" And then he told a story about a stranger who came up to him with a pocketknife and he said, "I think this belongs to you." And Lincoln said, "How is that?" And the man said, "This knife was placed in my hand some years ago with the injunction that I was to keep it until I found a man uglier than myself. And allow me to say, sir, I think you are fairly entitled to this as your property."

So there's this anxiety we have about how we look, who we are, where we're from, if we measure up, if we rate. Finally, we have the apostle Paul himself who cautioned us in his letters to Timothy and Titus to avoid tiresome genealogies (1 Timothy 1:4 and Titus 3:9). And he boasted about himself, tongue in cheek. He wrote:

Even I can have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has a reason to be confident, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I've come to regard as loss because of Christ.

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my savior. For his sake, I've suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from law, but one that comes through faith in Christ; the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death; if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:4-9)

Well, thinking about my own Lenten journey, I've made a vow to give up self-loathing for Lent: places where I'm not fully pleased and proud of myself, of what I am; giving up that shame and embracing the honor, the esteem granted to me by our Lord; by our embrace in this beloved community, by our endowment, through Easter redemption, of a new life, of a new creation, of a call to be holy ones and heralds of good news; good news of beloved community where all are embraced unconditionally, to soak that in during Lent so that at the Easter feast I am fully, fully inflamed with that good news.

One way I've thought of proclaiming it is the way that our other African-American scholar-friend, Cornel West, calls himself "a Jesus loving Black man." Or as we hear in Hebrews: belonging to the one who is 'not ashamed to call us sisters and brothers' (Hebrews 2:11b). Thanks be to God!