

Sermon: Seeing the Family Resemblance

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Scripture: Ephesians 4:1

When Tamara Rabi arrived at Hofstra University, fellow students seemed unusually friendly. People she had never laid eyes on would smile and wave to her like she was a fast friend. As a new student, Tamara was caught off-guard by this behavior. A few people said she looked just like someone else they knew. Tamara just figured it was probably someone else from Mexico.

So when a friend of a friend showed up at her 20th birthday party and could not stop staring at her, it was annoying but not surprising. Finally, this stranger, named Justin, told her that she looked exactly like his friend Adriana Scott, who was also born in Mexico. As they talked further, other odd similarities emerged. Adriana was adopted just like Tamara. And they both shared the same birthday. Justin insisted that they had to be sisters, but Tamara shook her head. She was an only child, she said. Still, she agreed to let Justin set up a meeting, first over the internet just to see why everyone kept staring at her.

Thus began the unfolding of a real life fairytale. Adriana, raised a Roman Catholic in a house with a white picket fence in Valley Stream on Long Island, and Tamara, raised Jewish in an apartment near the American Museum of Natural History on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, are twins. They were separated at birth because of problems with the adoption process, and had no idea there was a twin sister somewhere. They had been separated by 20 years of time, a half hour drive and total ignorance.

It all came to light a few evenings after the birthday party. Justin arranged for Tamara and Adriana to instant message one another. They soon discovered they were indeed both born in Mexico on the same day, were both exactly 5' 3" tall, both loved to dance, and both used Pantene shampoo. But it was when Adriana sent a picture of herself that the wonder finally hit. The picture of Adriana was Tamara all over again, minus a small birthmark Tamara had on her eyebrow.

The twins agreed to meet the following Sunday at a McDonald's parking lot near Hofstra, a world away from the Guadalajara hospital where they had last been together. Awkward conversation and curious glances were shared. Meanwhile, their friends were stunned by the similarities in their voices and mannerisms.

After lunch, they went to each others' homes to meet their mothers, both of whom reacted the same way. Jaws dropped, they stared wide-eyed and overwhelmed by the family resemblance the two shared. Radically different upbringings and experiences could not erase the obvious: they shared a common DNA that connected them to one another. Today, both sisters have graduated college with degrees in psychology, and spend a lot of time with one another.¹

Stories like that grip us. But even more amazing is the incredible true story of how the spiritual DNA of our Heavenly Father renovates, shapes, and directs the lives of those who are truly His children by faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, the language of the NT makes it plain that at the point when we are made sons and daughters of God by faith in His Son's death and resurrection for us, a radical inward change is begun. This inward change is so pervasive, so decisive, so certain, that the NT fully expects every true Christian will be very different from this world.

You claim to be a Christian this morning? Prove it, says the Bible. How do I prove it? A changed and changing life. For true Christians, habits will be reformed in different directions. Language gets cleaned up. Impulses toward self-centered, self-promoting, self-satisfying pursuits are overhauled. There is a sense of wrongdoing in a true Christian when he or she tries to satisfy needs like the world does. There is a shift from living for the body to living for Christ and His kingdom.

These changes are not negotiable. They necessarily flow from kinship with Christ. They are the natural byproduct of belonging to God's family. You can hear this deep inward change hinted at in passages like Ezekiel 36:26-27, where the OT prophet foresees the saving work of Christ with breathtaking words: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will place My Spirit within you and cause you to follow My statutes and carefully observe My ordinances."

New heart, new spirit, new ability to obey! Does anyone talk about that in the NT? The Son of God does. In John 3:3, Jesus was sought out covertly by a leader in the Jewish Sanhedrin who had some questions. Jesus sets forth the great need of us all: "I assure you: Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3)

Then in v. 7, Jesus gets personal with Nicodemus and says, "You must be born again." This is the language of a new kind of life. Birth introduces me to a family to which I belong. I don't get a vote on the color of my hair or the features of my face. I am the son of my Father. Birth also drives home the fact that it wasn't my doing, but God's. New birth means new life, new purpose, new meaning, new power. This in turn creates a new way of thinking, a new kind of behaving and speaking.

So what are we to make of the fact that the Barna Group, which researches and reports on trends among professing Christians nationwide, reported that born again Christians are just as likely to divorce as are non-Christians?ⁱⁱ

Or, how are we to process the report about evangelicals by Ron Sider in his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?*, which asserts only 9 percent of Christians tithe, and of 12,000 teenagers who took a pledge to wait for marriage 80 percent had sex outside of marriage in the subsequent seven years?ⁱⁱⁱ

Barna still calls professing Christians in whom there is no difference from the world "born again." And Sider calls them evangelicals. But the NT is not that favorable in its estimation. Instead of assuming that there are truly born again people who are permeated with worldliness, the Bible asserts that the church is permeated with worldly people who are not born again. "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things have come." (2 Cor. 5:17)

This morning, we will begin a series of messages about what a real Christian looks like. Over the next several weeks, we are going to hold up the mirror of God's Word and do what 2 Cor. 13:5 exhorts, "Test yourselves [to see] if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves." We will look at the power that produces this change and measure our growth to see how we're doing. We're also going to see what it means when we keep failing and falling. I invite you to take the trip with me in the series titled "Changed from the Inside Out".

This morning I leave you with the powerful call of Ephesians 4:1: "I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received." Paul opens his exhortation with a reminder to his readers that he is in jail because he has practiced what this verse describes. He holds out his chains to us and says, "This truth is worth being imprisoned for, worth dying for."

He also adds the connecting word therefore, which tells us that what he is about to write is based on what preceded it so far. Therefore means, "Based on what Eph. 1-3 says, I strongly exhort you to walk worthy." To expand a little further, it means something like this: Do you believe that as a Christian you have been "blessed . . . with every spiritual blessing"? Do you believe that you were God loved you so much He chose you and "predestined [you] to be adopted through Jesus Christ"? Do you believe that you have "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses"? Do you believe that you have been "sealed with the promised Holy Spirit"? Do you really believe that you were once "dead in trespasses" and now have been "made alive"?

Do you believe that "you are His creation [His masterpiece], created in Christ Jesus for good works"? Do you believe that you are "fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household"? Do you believe that you "are being built together for God's dwelling"? Do you really believe that God is "able to above and beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in you"?

If you believe these things, says Paul, then here's what you need to do: "walk worthy of the calling you have received." The word on which this phrase turns is the word "worthy." In Greek, it is the word *axios* from which we get our English word "axis." In Paul's day, the word referred to a method for measuring weight using a counterbalance.

Picture if you will something like a child's seesaw. Something is placed on one side of the beam. The word "worthy" means to add weight to the other side of the beam so that it's equal. It means to balance the scales.

Now add that meaning back into the verse and read it again. Paul basically says, "Put all that Jesus has done for you and all that you have received because of Him on one side of the scales. Now place your life on the other side of the scales. Does it balance?" If it balances, you are walking worthy. If it balances, your life is fully expressing who you are in Christ.

Stand back and look carefully. This morning, get honest and ask yourself, "Does my attitude toward my spouse, my guidance of my children, my behavior on the job, my temperance behind the wheel, my faithfulness to God in small things, my willingness to sacrifice, my words to and about others, my involvement in spiritual opportunities with the church reflect what my Savior has done for me? Or have I settled for the drowsy, television-soaked, semi-devotion that the Barna Group describes - where there is little or no real difference between you and the world?"

I want Him to increase and me to decrease. I want to come to the place where my life from the inside out is pleasing to my God. George Mueller of Bristol, England knew the secret: "There was a day when I died: died to George Mueller, his opinions, preferences, tastes and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my brethren or friends, and since then, I have studied only to show myself 'approved unto God.'"^{iv}

Little wonder that it was said of Mueller that he "had the twenty-third psalm written in his face."^v

I want to be like this. Real. Authentic. Jesus through and through. Don't you?

ⁱ Elissa Gootman, "Separated at Birth in Mexico, Reunited at Campuses on Long Island" (NY Times, March 3, 2003), online at <http://nytimes.com/> "Twist of Fate" (48 Hours, June 18, 2004), online at <http://www.cbsnews.com/>

ⁱⁱ The Barna Group reports on divorce (Sept. 8, 2004), online at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=170>

ⁱⁱⁱ Cited by John Piper in the sermon, "You Must Be Born Again," online at <http://www.desiringgod.org>

^{iv} Cited by Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, p. 71.

^v Ibid.