



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 7, 2018
GENESIS 2:18-24; PSAM 8; HEBREWS 1:1-4, 2:5-12; MARK 10:2-16

ANALYZING OUR DNA

Mark 10:2-16 *[Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.]*

One of my sabbatical larks last summer was for Kathy and me to send off our ancestral DNA test kits. I know the science used to generate data is sound, but the statistical analysis used to draw conclusions about ancestry is rather soft. Nevertheless, curiosity prevailed.

Kathy's report confirmed her Japanese-American heritage. No surprises there.

But I was raised with a firm narrative that I was part-Cherokee Indian. For seven generations and counting, there was certitude about that fact. I knew my great-great grandmother, Lottie Mae Williams, who was born in 1878 and died when I was six-years-

old. Her facial features testify to the story she told and all since have held fast: that her grandmother was taken in by a settler in the foothills of the Arkansas Ozarks while she walked the Trail of Tears.

We took our daughters on pilgrimages to the homeland in Cherokee, North Carolina and to the reservation in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. I investigated Cherokee traditions, and at one point considered applying for tribal status. These were not exactly healthy impulses, but I was living along a narrative I had been taught all my life.

But then my DNA report came and shot holes into my story. Apparently, there's not a Cherokee gene in my body. The exercise prompted a good laugh and a little wistfulness.

This was not an existential crisis for me, but it has presented the unexpected gift that, at some deeply meaningful level, breaking up some long-held identifiers to reflect instead on the common humanity that underlies it all can be immensely gratifying.

You and I, and every human that has ever lived have 99.9% of our genetic material in common. We share 95% with other mammals, and we humans share as much as 50% of our DNA in common with plants that grow on earth.

That's the portal into this troubling passage from Genesis which has, I suspect for many of us, been used as a narrative for most of our lives, and certainly for most of human history, to subjugate women and to

marginalize any whose sexuality does not fit nicely into traditional binary classifications. But if we unravel the story a bit, like a chromosomal strand, we will find a very different meaning.

To be sure, this story carries culturally-laden notions of gender and sexuality present when it was written some 2600 years ago, and we can trace its origins further back to ancient Mesopotamian creation myths.

Myths lend meaning, but they must be unpacked. Myths may or may not be true on the outside, but they always contain truth on the inside.

But it is a misappropriation of the text to suggest that woman comes from man and is therefore subjugate to man. Three Hebrew words help us sort this out—*ha'adam*, *ish*, and *ishshah*.ⁱ

Ha'adam, best translated as humanity, is derived from the Hebrew word *adamah*, which means dirt, soil, the earth. God forms humanity out of the earth. It's a beautiful image.

The word for individual male human is *ish*, and for individual female human is *ishshah*, but these are not used in the first part of this passage. Elsewhere in Genesis (1:27, 5:2) when it speaks of God creating "man," the word used is not *ish*, but *ha'adam*, humanity—all humanity.

There's this mythic story of thoracic surgery on *ha'adam*, the human, (not *ish*, male human). After that *ish* and *ishshah* are used, but not before. We are all flesh of one flesh,

bone of one bone, and we are *ha'adam*, dust of the earth, and from that common root, we then branch out into all the ways we express our humanity.ⁱⁱ

And, as a slight digression, when the woman is called to be man's helper, the word used here for helper is the same used for God as helper to humanity, so we would do well not to suggest helper here is a pejorative noun. And let's face it, we need all the help we can get.

Many feminist and queer theologians maintain that to simply reject this passage and others like it as ancient pabulum paradoxically gives more power to those who continue to misappropriate them for their evil purposes. Our work is to reclaim them, and unpack them in life-giving ways. because they are still used for nefarious purposes to authorize misogyny and discrimination. We can do better; we must do better.

I am not preaching on the gospel this morning, but let me just say that it, too, has been used as a text of terror to subjugate women and to keep them in stifling and even dangerous relationships. Again, the passage is culturally situated in First Century Palestine, with all its burdens of unjust treatment of women, but if you mine the text for its deeper meaning, you will find that Jesus is not condemning divorce per se; rather, he is condemning the reality that divorce in his time meant the woman was left destitute, often homeless, shamed and outcast. She was left with few options to eke out a survival, and most of those were simply

terrible. The admonition comes to us in our time as well.

That could be a whole sermon unto itself, but we've got a meal to share, and animals to bless, so I will move on to say the animals you have brought, in addition to the wonderful ways they help us understand love and affection more vibrantly in our lives, maybe they can bring us back around to this notion that we are formed of the earth (as were they), and that our shared genetic constitution is a gentle reminder that we are part of the whole. St. Francis knew this intuitively without knowing a lick of cell biology—that we all arise from the earth, and will return to it.

I am mindful this day, with animals in our midst, and the dappled leaves of autumn falling to earth in their own right, they we are invited into an earthy communion of beauty and connection. And I am mindful that we have not adequately claimed our root identity as *ha'adam*, dust of the earth, when human-caused climate change stands as perhaps the greatest crisis of our time. So on this Feast of St. Francis, I want to say a bit about that.

Climate scientists are telling us that we cannot fix the problem just by driving hybrids, recycling and replacing light bulbs in our homes. Those are important, but those alone will not offer the correction needed. We must embrace systemic changes to reverse carbon loads, and one way to do that is to tie economic incentives to the changes. Tax credits for renewable energies has a good track record. Gasoline taxes and toll roads are less popular but effective.

Our state has on the November ballot a new initiative, not yet tried elsewhere. I-1631 authorizes a fee on fossil fuel distributors for the carbon load each ton of that fuel released into the atmosphere, with the revenues to be used on clean energy infrastructure, clean water, and healthy forests. While not perfect, it is an interesting and innovative approach to the very real problem of climate change.ⁱⁱⁱ

That's a very high level summary, and I am not telling you to vote for the initiative, but I am imploring each of you to read up on the initiative and cast your vote as informed citizens, because we are in this together. Your animal companions are in it with us, as is all creation, as is all humanity, *ha'adam*.

I believe that climate change is an existential crisis, and we as people of faith, who claim that God formed us from the earth in love, and claims us in this life as beloved children, is calling us now into our bedrock identity as human beings, part of the whole.

It will take courage and persistence and patience, too—all integral to the human spirit because such virtues are woven into our genetic constitution, made of one cloth, enabling us to consider the healing of God's creation as central work for us as people of God gathered in this place.

ⁱ <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/genesis/2.htm>

ⁱⁱ <https://margmowczko.com/human-man-woman-genesis-2/>

ⁱⁱⁱ There are several web-based resources on I-1631, although most are partisan to one outcome or another. I recommend you read your ballot guide in addition to perusing some of these sites.



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