



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Kith & Kin¹

1 Peter 2:9-10

A sermon by William M. Klein

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9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. **10** Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet. 2:9-10 NRSV)

1

Family heritage is a tricky thing, isn't it? You who have spent any time doing genealogical research know there are things about a family heritage to be proud of...but there are some skeletons better left in the closet.

My father hails from Georgia. He laughingly says people from Georgia don't look too far back down the family tree because Georgia was founded by Great Britain as a penal colony.² I understand Australians might share a genealogical reticence for the same reason.

All the same, you may just be one of those people proud of your ancestry. Deb, whose maiden name is Heckel, recently found out from ancestry.com that she has less Germanic heritage than she thought...and more DNA coming out of England, Ireland, Northwestern Europe, and Scandinavia.

As you may know, I take a certain amount of pride in my Scots lineage. My surname is not Scots...it's German, or more specifically, Bavarian. Apparently the Kleins from which I have sprung arrived in this country four generations ago. That troop of Kleins migrated to Minnesota where they must have found fertile soil and an agreeable climate. My father's father moved to Atlanta before my father was born.

My grandmother Klein was a Kohnen. Her mother was a Marks. Deutsche was spoken in the home of her youth. She may have retained some knowledge of her primary language, but I never heard her utter any.

My mother was a MacLeod. Her MacLeod family migrated to this country beginning nine generations back - entering into North Carolina through the Cape Fear River at Wilmington and settling in Moore County. My mother's maternal family includes names like Shaw and Wilson. Something you may not know is that my great grandmother Jenny Wilson Shaw was the sister of Mary Coulling's grandmother. Kinfolk.

2

Our reading from 1 Peter is about kinfolk, too...but kin of a different sort, isn't it? The writer of 1 Peter talks about kin via adoption. "Once you were no people...now you are God's people," reads the text. **Kin by adoption...kin by God's conscious choice.**

The passage from 1 Peter is more about a new name God has given us than it is about blood-line or where we came from. Clearly, our biological inheritance is important and indelible. That we were all held in our mother's arms is part of our identity, a stamp we carry with us forever. But the more significant facet of our identity has to do with adoption as sons and daughters of the one God.

1

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote of his new adopted identity in this way. He said if being a good, life-long, highly educated Jew counted for anything, he had it all. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day, a Pharisee in his zeal, righteous and blameless as you could get. A Jew in that day could not have a much better pedigree. "But," wrote Paul, "I count all these things as worthless compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus." He was ready to tear up and throw in the trash any credit his pedigree earned him. Nothing compared to the joy of knowing Jesus as Lord. Nothing!³

The first Christians were convinced that in identifying with Jesus' death on the cross, something within them "died."⁴ That something was replaced by a desire to live – a passion to live as God made them to live – an enthusiasm to live how they are meant to live, which is to say, forever... kingdom living, if you will – here and now. As this new life more and more defined their identity, God's kingdom living became more and more present in their lives.⁵

A significant part of what it means to be adopted by our Lord is learning who we are in Christ.⁶ It means learning what it means to be the people God keeps insisting we already are. Citing Philippians again, Paul said – "Let us live up to what we have already attained." There is this person and this people we already are in God's eyes. The task we face is learning to live like it is true.⁷

This is an issue of identity. It is letting what God says about us shape what we believe about ourselves. It is part of the learning curve that comes with the realization God loves you and me and the woman across town and the man across the political aisle and the enemy eager to have us fail...the startling realization that God loves all of us enough to make us kith and kin.

3

We are talking about a reorientation – a radical reorientation of "family values," if you will. You hear some people spouting this and that about the importance of family values. They call for a return to a set of values they call biblically based family values... which I have always found rather curious. What families in the Bible have values we should model? King David? Jacob and Esau? Hosea and Gomer? If the values of the families in the Bible serve a purpose it is as an example **not** to follow.

My sense is that those who make such a fuss about the loss of family values don't have any idea what the Bible says about the subject. They may want greater family cohesiveness. They may want the planet to quit spinning so quickly. They may want a shopping list of things to happen within their family. But the last thing they really want is families like the ones in the Bible.

We should probably think of the biblical values that best shape individuals and families in terms of love...but it is love of God and neighbor more than love of self...a kind of forgiving, merciful, inclusive love. It is a love that is meant to help encourage life – to help new life bloom and flourish...but often enough it seems to tear biological families apart. Biblical values certainly have to do with lineage...but they have more to do with adoption – with being chosen – with being changed from people we thought we were into God's people. Biblical values have to do with wisdom...but not with wisdom as the world thinks of it. The wisdom that shines through the pages of the New Testament has to do

with the foolishness of a Lord who has a special affection for the poor, the sick, the nobodies, those who are never chosen by anyone for anything. Biblical wisdom has to do with a despised, rejected, and crucified Messiah. Biblical values do not care a thing about us making a name for ourselves. They call us to make Christ's name known... to proudly, humbly bear the name, "Christian."

4

According to 1 Peter, God adopts us out of his unreasonable love. We are also told God adopts us so that individually and as a new community we will become his witnesses. The text says God chooses us in order that together we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

According to E. T. Thompson [who was for many years a professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond], in less than 300 years from the death of Jesus, the mass of the Roman Empire was nominally Christianized. How to explain such a thing? Thompson says you cannot simply say "the time was ripe" – or that there was a highly organized missionary effort because there wasn't. The massive spread of the gospel was due to one ordinary Christian after another witnessing to those with whom he or she came into contact. It spread because of one loving heart setting another on fire.⁸

Did you know the word *witness* is what was meant by the Greek word we know as "martyr?" To be a martyr in the early church was not necessarily to be put to death. It was to witness to one's faith one person to another. It involved telling and retelling the gospel story and watching one heart set another on fire.

Apparently, in its proper sphere, "martyr" was a legal term – denoting one who was compelled to speak from personal experience about actions in which he or she took place and which happened to him or her. To be a martyr in the 1st century literally meant to bear witness before Roman courts of law. Such witness may have led to persecution or death...but in the 1st century, at least, the focus was on the provocative testimony that had to be given.⁹

Can I Get a Witness? It's the title of a book written by Brian Blount, president of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond...my, Deb's, and Kelly-Ann's alma mater. And if you have attended a worship service in the black tradition, you may have heard someone utter the words Blount used for his title. It is fairly common for black preachers to interject these words in the midst of a sermon – "Can I get a witness?" According to Blount, the preacher wants the listener not only to hear what he or she is saying, but to understand and then to act upon it.¹⁰

"Can I get a witness?" says the preacher. He or she wants the people in the pew to respond – that is, to give a witness. The preacher is not looking for someone who wants to just sit there. He or she is hunting for someone who will stand up and deliver.¹¹ The preacher is trying to encourage his or her listeners to give voice to their gratitude – to the incredible good news that they have been adopted into God's family – to tell the news in word and deed one person to another.

Faithful witnesses. Living martyrs. Kith and kin by adoption. That's what we are...by the grace of God. Ain't it simply amazing! I suppose we might say, amazing grace. Can I get a witness?

3



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Endnotes:

¹ *Kith* is obsolete except in the alliterative phrase *kith and kin*, which originally meant "native land and people" and first appeared about 1377 in *Piers Plowman*. *Kith* comes from the Old English noun for, "knowledge; known, familiar country; acquaintances, friends." *Kith* in turn comes from the Germanic noun **kunthithō*, a derivative of **kunthaz*, "known." Germanic **kunthaz* was the past participle of a verb **kunnan*, "to know, know how," which became *cunnan* in Old English. The first person singular of this verb, *can*, is alive and well today, as is what was originally the verbal noun and adjective of *cunnan*, namely *cunning*, first appearing in the 14th century. Germanic **kunthaz* itself survived in the Old English adjective *cūth*, "known, familiar," a word that became obsolete in southern English by 1600, but has survived in its negative, *uncouth*. Modern English *couth* is actually a jocular back-formation introduced by Max Beerbohm in 1896. See - <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/kith+and+kin>

² In January of 1733, Colonel James Edward Oglethorpe, a graduate of Oxford, a brave soldier, and then a member of Parliament, landed in Charleston, SC, with a load of thirty-five families – i.e., one hundred and twenty emigrants, men, women, and children. They had sailed from Gravesend for Georgia in the ship *Anne*, of two hundred tons burden, on the 6th of November, 1732. They were accompanied not just by Colonel Oglethorpe who would be governor, but the Rev. Mr. Shubert, of the Church of England, as a spiritual guide, and a few Piedmontese silk-workers; for one of the projects of the trustees was the growing of silk in Georgia. The criminals were prisoners for debt in Great Britain and had not really be convicted of any crime. So...to say they were a bunch of criminals is not completely accurate. See the web - http://www.publicbookshelf.com/public_html/Our_Country_Vol_1/historyco_fj.html. Also...Oglethorpe was angry after a friend of his died in debtors' prison and called for an investigation into the conditions of British jails. He also formulated a plan to obtain the release of people from debtors' prison and to establish a new colony, south of Carolina, to be inhabited by the "worthy poor" of London. The "worthy poor" included the debtors and other homeless people. See web - http://www.netstate.com/states/intro/ga_intro.htm.

³ See Philippians 3:4b-11.

⁴ Bell, Rob. 2005. *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 139.

⁵ Bell, 147.

⁶ Bell, 144.

⁷ Bell, 141-142. Citing Philippians 3:16.

⁸ Thompson, Ernest T. 1965. *Through the Ages, a History of the Christian Church*. Richmond: CLC Press, 32.

⁹ Blount, Brian K. 2005. *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture*. Louisville: WJK Press, 46-47.

¹⁰ Blount, 37.

¹¹ Blount, 39.