

**Stepping out in Faith to be a Blessing**  
**March 5, 2023**  
**Romans 4:1-5; 13-17**  
**Rev. Laurie Crelly at East Church**  
**Grand Rapids MI**

How many of you have taken an ancestry DNA test? I have not but I find them very interesting, maybe someday. I have heard stories and how you get read outs that show you regional mapping of where your family of origin comes from. It may narrow the focus to a particular subgroup or region. Sometimes you get a surprise. There is a Youtube video of a group of British people taking their DNA tests. The film crew recorded segments of what the participants thought their results would show. One many that stands out to me was adamant that he was 100% English and had great animosity toward Germans. He was shocked to find out he actually had a significant percentage of German heritage.

Even if you don't do the DNA many families maintain or research family trees to confirm and expand the heritage of their ancestors. My mother's family tree goes back to the early 1700s through vital records tracing my great, great grandfather back to Eastern Germany formerly known as Prussia. You may have one or two dedicated members of the family that have the time and resources to take this on as a hobby and work to follow it back even further. Along the way they may discover some fascinating stories or theories about an ancestor's movements, significant accomplishments, or harrowing experiences. Many do this to deepen our sense of identity and connection to ethnic past.

One of the interesting facts about DNA testing is that if you analyze the maternally inherited mitochondrial DNA of a group of people, you may identify the origin genetics of ancient ancestral mothers, sometimes called the founding mothers, especially if your bloodline was isolated from the larger population or migrated as a group to form a subgroup. For example, we believe that the indigenous populations of the Americas migrated to the continent. This is confirmed by DNA testing that shows 95% of indigenous people in North and Central America come from six mothers according to

the mitochondrial DNA. Similarly, scientists studied the mitochondrial DNA of 11,000 women of Jewish Ashkenazi origin living in 67 different countries. Ashkenazi or Ashkenazim is a Hebrew term that means German and identifies Jewish people who migrated and settled in central Europe during the Roman Empire. Over half of this genetic pool tested contains four distinct strands of DNA, indicating a common maternal ancestry, now known as the Ashkenazi founding mothers. There are nine identifiable lines of Jewish heritage the two largest being Ashkenazi or European Jewish, which, since world war II includes America and Sephardic which is found around the Mediterranean countries.

It is fascinating to identify our physical DNA and to know where we come from, but what about our Spiritual DNA? Who do we point to as our Spiritual Mother and Father? This question brings us to the next stop on our journey to the cross. Abraham and Sarah are seen as not only the genetic ancestors of the Jewish people, but they are also seen as the spiritual ancestors of the three major religions of the world - Judaism Christianity, and Islam trace their faith in One God to Abraham and Sarah's faith. Paul raises this point in our reading from Romans this morning. Paul asks, "What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh?" Paul uses this play on words regarding flesh and spirit to remind the reader that we look to Abraham not only as the genetic ancestor of the Jewish people, but also as our spiritual founding ancestor. Paul goes on to point out Abraham and Sarah's spiritual DNA in Romans 4:3 "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." One could say that the birthplace of Faith in God is found in Abraham when he decides to listen to and follow the Call of God on his life. In Paul's eyes this is significant to non-Jewish believers because it is before the founding of the Law of Moses and even circumcision that is seen as a distinguishing practice of the descendants of Abraham. Paul says in v. 13: "For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith."

So let's look a little closer at this historic event. God sought out a faithful soul and it is Abraham that responds in faith. In the preceding chapters of Genesis we see the decline of civilization both before and after Noah. Chapter 11 even ends with the tower of Babel and the people once again attempting to become like God. But in chapter 12 we begin the story of Abraham and Sarah and their fledgling faith in God that is humble and trusting of God's spirit at work in their lives. God calls Abraham and Sarah to leave all that they know and trust God's leading. They do all this on a command and a promise: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

The Hebrew word here, Barak (strong's 1288) is the root word to kneel, but used over 400 times to mean to receive a blessing. This act of submission is an act of reverence or greeting upon receiving something. It carries this blend of gratitude, reverence and good will.

In this Promise in Genesis 12 we see two things:

1. God will Bless us, and
2. We will be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

And according to Paul, Abraham's faith was counted as a blessing to all meaning that through Abraham the ultimate act of God's blessing is the healing of the nations would come. As Christians we proclaim that God is the fulfillment of that blessing is found in Jesus, who saves the world or heals the world.

So within our spiritual DNA are these gifts of blessing, healing and salvation. That is God's blessing to us. But there is a second part of that blessing. We, like Abraham, are also called to pass on that blessing, that healing and restorative power of Christ to the world. That is the promise of God through our Spiritual DNA.

Unfortunately, in today's culture, being blessed is often reduced to material wealth often known as the prosperity gospel, wealth gained often at the expense of other people's wellbeing and ability to live a healthy life themselves. It often lacks a true spirit

of sharing of the blessing if the workers are unable to afford housing, health insurance or need to choose between food or paying bills even if they have a full time job.

Paul argues in Romans that we are not to give into the fleshly desires of this world but to be filled with the spirit. And yet some preachers of the prosperity Gospel claim that our ability to accumulate wealth is evidence of our favor with God. This, however is a false teaching of the Bible. Look at the text again. The goal is not to be prosperous. The goal is to be a blessing to others.

According to the New Interpreters Commentary, "The call of Abraham does not narrow God's channel of activity down to a history of Salvation. These texts speak to creation all issues such as life and death, birth and marriage and burial, family and community, economic and political realities, human conflicts and ambiguities and joys, and divine blessings that reach into every sphere of life." (NIBC 417-418). The sin of selfish greed cuts off the flow of God's blessing from reaching others and allowing all of creation to prosper and grow in this world.

God is seeking to restore the original Blessing of Creation to the world through the lineage of Abraham. Why? So that we can be that blessing to others. So that we can partner with God to restore the blessing of Creation to the world. Jesus came to continue to fulfill the promise given to Abraham and Sarah which was to restore creation to its original beauty and to restore our relationship with God our creator. Just as Abraham had to step out in faith, so too are we called to step out in faith believing we carry the blessing of God to the world.

Do you want to honor your spiritual ancestors? Be an extravagant blessing to others. Seek the welfare of others, bring healing not harm. Do you want to know who you are spiritually related to? Don't look at their titles or their creeds, look at their actions. Look to those who are seeking to restore the humanity and wellbeing of others. They are the ones living up to their spiritual heritage. Just as Jesus said, "They will know you are my disciples by your love." Go and show your faith by being a blessing to others and make your spiritual ancestors proud.

