

“Our Family Traits”
Galatians 5:13-26; 6:10
October 15, 2006

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It seems obvious to say, but one of the primary functions of the church is to be messengers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Last Sunday I began our sermon series on how I think this works: not just that we transmit information like the Internet, or carry a package like a Fedex man, but rather, that we carry the message of the gospel in our very being -- the same way that our own bodies carry the message of our family's DNA.

This is not a far stretch Biblically. Scripture tells us that when we're baptized into Christ, we become reborn as offspring of the Holy Spirit. As last week's reading from Hebrews says: "God's Son ... is the exact imprint of God's very being. ... And [Christ] who makes us holy, and we who are being made holy, all have one Father. Jesus is not ashamed to call [us] brothers and sisters" (Hebrews 1:2; 2:11). It stands to reason that as individual Christians and as a family of faith, we will then manifest attributes of the Spirit -- more and more, we will begin to resemble Jesus Christ.

This is my hypothesis, anyway, which I intend to test over these next five weeks. If I am right, then just like any family our DNA will replicate itself from generation to generation, copied and combined over and over again: in the distinguishing marks and traits that keep turning up ... in the family stories that keep turning up, shaping the way we think about ourselves ... in the cherished core values that keep turning up, not just folkways but deep-seated principles without which we wouldn't recognize ourselves ... and in the family heroes and characters that turn up, the people on our family tree who loom large in their impact on us and on our world. For today, we'll focus on our family traits. Listen to the word of God as it comes to us from Paul's letter to the Galatians:

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is

opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. . . . So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

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Family traits. We all have them. Among my siblings we have what we’ve dubbed “the Chakoian early growth gene”: a propensity to grow fast and then top out at twelve years old. Oddly, it seems to be accompanied by a thick mop of curly hair, but I’m not convinced that they’re related.

What are your family traits? A porcelain English complexion you can trace back to the Mayflower? A tall and slender frame passed down from your Swedish grandmother? Perhaps even a personality trait, like a positive outlook or a head for math? Every family has traits – neither earned nor acquired, they just come with the gene-pool.

As Christians, we have family traits too – telltale signs that we are Jesus’ brothers and sisters, heirs of the same gene-pool that he received from the Spirit of God.

The way Galatians puts it is this: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” The traits of the Christ will show up in the Christian family – simply because we come from that stock. Moreover, these family traits are dominant, not recessive. Earlier in Galatians Paul points out that the traits of our Christian lineage are so strong that they surpass the rest of our gene-pool: “Whoever is baptized into Christ has taken on the traits of Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor

female.” Whatever differences of nationality, class, even gender we carry in our fleshly DNA, our new Spiritual DNA overrides. Even as we celebrate the gifts of artisans around the world at the 10,000 Villages sale today, or listen to the children sing from the Hispanic Christian repertoire [at the 9:00 service], or celebrate the Word of God passed down across continents and generations, or welcome new members who are long-time Christians or newly baptized [at the 11:00 service] – even as we do these things, we notice startling similarities across the board. Regardless of nationality, regardless of wealth or poverty, regardless of youth or age, the same traits keep showing up: traits like love, traits like joy, traits like peace, traits like patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness. These are the traits we all exhibit when we’re baptized into Christ’s DNA.

So why don’t we always look that way? Why is it that good Christians can exhibit so many characteristics that are decidedly *unchristian* – traits like selfishness, traits like entitlement, traits like indifference to the suffering of others, traits like gossip and quarrels and strife? Not that these things would ever happen here.

St. Paul, who was an astute observer of human nature, tells us this: though we have Christ’s traits within us now, we still have the traits of our old self in us too. Though the science would be centuries away, St. Paul was essentially saying that our spiritual DNA and our fleshly DNA are constantly wrestling with each other for dominance. So it is that even in Paul’s day, what he called the “traits of the flesh” still showed up in Christians: traits like “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.”

So the question isn’t whether these traits will show up in the Christian family, but what happens when they do. In the churches I’ve served, this is what I’ve observed: we usually pretend that there’s nothing wrong. Maybe it’s because we are so afraid of being judgmental; or maybe it’s because we want to practice Christian patience; or maybe it’s because we don’t want to lose a member of our church, or worse, their pledge; or maybe it’s just because we don’t know what to do – but the reality is that the congregations I’ve served have tended to let an awful lot of decidedly unchristian traits go unchecked ... and sometimes, even thrive.

But while it’s tempting to overlook each other’s dreadful traits – if even out of Christian love – the problems only grow worse when we do. Just as we do no

favors to the alcoholic by pretending that there's nothing wrong, so we do no favors to the body of Christ by accepting destructive behaviors. What we let stand, we will encourage, and as we do, the traits of Christ recede into the background. In his 16th century commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther observed, "If the unity of the Spirit is injured and destroyed, ... errors will go on arising into infinity." (Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*, Hermeneia commentary series (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 283).

And what happens to our Christian witness then? Ultimately, this is what matters most of all. When we allow ourselves to exhibit the worst of our coarse traits – when we indulge ourselves in our jealousy, backbiting, self-indulgence and gossip – what happens to the message of Christ we are carrying in us? When people know we are Christians, do we not imply that this is what Christ's image looks like? And who will bear the message of Christ if we who bear his name do not? It is not just our own salvation at stake; it is the very presence of Christ in the world.

This is why our behavior – the traits we exhibit – matter so very much. We *are* the body of Christ – we *are* the messengers of the gospel – we *bear* the traits of Christ on his behalf now.

So how do we do it well?

I think sometimes we make it harder on ourselves than we need to. We make our faith such a mystery, or an onerous discipline, or an unreachable holiness. But all we really have to do is this: to remember who we really are, and be true to our deepest selves. I love the way Jesus himself puts it: "Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush." (Luke 6:44). Once we have received the Spirit of Christ, we are already part of the Tree of Life; we have good fruit to bear, if we will only tend it a little. When we act like wretches, we need to prune that behavior; when we dry up and become brittle, we need to drink deeply of Scripture and prayer; and when we find ourselves, from grief or stress or failure, when we find ourselves forgetting altogether who we are in Jesus Christ, then we need to come home to our Christian family, to this dear gathering of brothers and sisters who will help us remember our best selves.

And when we do – when we remember truly who we are, then we cannot help but show the face of Christ to the rest of the world.

I'm hardly the only one who has commented on this, but the witness of the Amish in the wake of their loss was astonishing. When Charles Carl Roberts mowed down their little girls in their one-room schoolhouse in rural Pennsylvania, their reaction was astonishing. In the wake of their devastating, unfathomable losses, the invasion of their peaceful community, the violence done to their serene haven – in the midst of all their grief and pain and sorrow, there was still only one response: forgiveness. Deep, and true, and untarnished forgiveness. “We’re very concerned,” one Amish man named John said. “We’re very concerned that no message of revenge gets out. We believe in forgiveness.”

Where does such a gracious, astonishing response come from? I am convinced that the only place it could come from is the deep integrity of their faithfulness ... a lifelong practice of connection to God ... an utterly clear knowledge of who they really are in Jesus, their Lord.

This is why our witness matters. This is why our Christian traits are so crucial. We carry the message of Jesus Christ in our every word and action, in every characteristic we bear. And Christ needs us to do it well. The fruits of the Spirit occur in the Christian community as the manifestation of Christ’s presence in the world. Where these fruits are born, there is no room left for their opposite, for our old traits of the flesh. All we need to do is to remember who we really are now, and to let Christ shine in us. (Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*, Hermeneia commentary series (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 33).

I have quoted St. Teresa of Avila before, but it bears repeating here:

“Christ has no body now but yours
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours
 Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on the world.
 Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
 Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.” Amen.