

"Our Family Tree"
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The old family Bibles all had them: high gloss, embossed pages two-thirds through the Scripture, between the last of the prophets and the first of the gospels: a Family Genealogy to record the names of loved ones, from generation to generation. In the days before the Internet and instant access to archival records, this is how most families kept track of their family tree. In the huge white leather family Bible Grandma gave us, someone had recorded in careful hand Great-Grandma Anna Minassian, married to Hagop Kirishian; Ahtrig Kirishian married to Martinos Chakoian; Henry Chakoian married to Jacqueline Waddell Meyer. This is my family tree.

There's practicality to inscribing the names in that book, because for a long time, in common families, anyway, books were rare and expensive and the Bible might have been the only book a family owned. Certainly when persecutions broke out, which brought so many immigrants to these shores, it was the one possession always carried across the choppy seas, a ballast of sorts in the voyage between a frightening past and an unpredictable future. There's a practicality to inscribing the names in the Family Bible, and a fragile permanence, and, of course, a sacredness that goes with it too, fitting for the people who gave us life, the people whom we love.

But beyond that there's a sublime if unintended message: that the people who populate our lives -- our ordinary mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers -- that the people who populate our lives are no less holy than the people who appear everywhere else in the Bible. Alongside the names that appear in the Scripture, the names that appear on our Family Tree are also, truly, saints.

Ah, you say, but you don't know my Uncle Arnold or Aunt Prudie; my haughty cousin Agnes, my nasty little nephew Bobby. No, I must confess, I don't, though I've met plenty like them, and have a few in my own history I'd measure against any old time. What we mean by saints is crucial to get right. John Calvin, the founder of Presbyterianism, helped reclaim the original meaning of the word: "saint" is not reserved for the officially beatified; rather, a saint is any of the believers. The communion of saints includes not only "saintly" saints, but more often regular folk. All the saints have the potential to be models of faithfulness for us. 99% of them have major flaws ... but I am convinced their flaws have much to teach us as well.

How can I be so confident? Because no matter how unsavory the names recorded in the pages of our Bible's Family Tree, they can't be more scandalous than the names recorded in the pages of Scripture itself. This morning's passage from the letter to the Hebrews lifts up the faith of so many: Abraham and Moses and David and all the others. They are remarkable leaders, the bold-faced names on our Judeo-Christian Family Tree, without whom there would not be a people of faith today. But they are also remarkable scoundrels:

- Abraham, who for faith was willing to follow God anywhere, also tried to give away Sarah, his wife, to Pharaoh, because he was afraid;
- Moses, who for faith stood up to another Pharaoh, also killed a man, and in a later rage shattered the tablets of the Ten Commandments;
- The Hebrew people, who for faith crossed the sea to find freedom, abandoned God to worship idols, beginning with the Golden Calf;
- Rahab, who insured the Hebrew victory at Jericho, was also a prostitute;
- Jephthah, a judge of Israel, killed his own daughter because he made a senseless vow;
- Samson, the powerful, fell to lust;
- David the King committed adultery and then killed the very man whose wife he had seduced.

It is not exactly an inspiring record. Yet these are our saints, the very people whom Scripture tells us with a straight face are models of faithfulness.

The Family Tree of our faith is not a uniformly pretty sight ... not in Scripture, and certainly not in the millennia since the Good Book's words were written.

Someone reminded me last week on Reformation Sunday that our brave, learned, and passionate founder, John Calvin, allowed a scientist/physician, Servetus, to be burned at the stake for heresy. It begs us to ask what we're misjudging now. We know the missionaries of this last century, faithful, selfless, and dedicated to the gospel, also wreaked havoc on indigenous cultures worldwide. It invites us to consider what unintended gaffs we're making. Even our own Family Tree here at First Church teaches us in its patterns. Our most esteemed historic pastor, Dr. McClure, eventually the President of McCormick Seminary, almost failed his pastorate here before he even started. His memoirs record,

“On July 7th, 1881, the Congregation met to consider whether a call should be extended to me. A goodly majority favored doing so; some, however, objected. They claimed that ‘a church like this should have a minister of some reputation, and I was absolutely unknown! I was not large enough for such a community! It deserves more of a man!’”

You have to wonder what they'd be saying now! I've also learned that there's a long history of flare-ups between the pulpit and the music department. Though he had served brilliantly and faithfully as music director, one man had had enough of the changes in worship. After a particularly contentious disagreement with the pastor, he simply quit. The year was 1937, the man was Siegfried Gruenstein. They say that those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. I want to put it more positively: the more we learn from our Family Tree, the greater our understanding of ourselves, the wider our freedom to make different choices, the deeper our compassion for the foibles we all carry. (History courtesy of David E. Radcliffe.)

I have come to believe that it is not in spite of but *because* they have feet of clay that we gain so much from these saints who went before us. If their lives had been easy ... if they had never faced temptation ... if they had always taken the high

road ... we would not have learned from them the strength of leaning on the everlasting arms, the gentleness of God's forgiveness, the power of God's sovereign love. We would not have learned from them what it means to humble ourselves at the throne of grace ... how it often is that in our very times of frustration and weakness and even failure that we entrust ourselves to God's care and let go of our stubborn will.

Our Family Tree: it is hardly perfect. But it is all the more beautiful for its nuances and gnarls. Two weeks ago I invited you to recall the person or church that first handed the faith on to you, and to write that name on a leaf. These names are now hanging on our Family Tree in the Narthex. If you didn't have a chance to put a leaf on the tree, I hope you'll add one. There are leaves and markers available near the tree. But in the meantime, as you consider the people in your life who handed your faith on to you, I invite you to remember with love that they were not perfect. No doubt they had fabulous qualities that they passed on to you. But they also had difficult sides as well, quirks at least and sometimes worse. We do them no favors by pretending they were perfect. More still, we do ourselves no favors by disregarding their flaws. Their struggles may be more crucial lessons for us than their obvious gifts. In my own life I know that my mother's battle with alcoholism and depression was a far greater lesson in courage and faith than anything else she taught me. I suspect that your saints may have lessons from their struggles and weaknesses for you as well.

So today let us celebrate the saints in our lives: the names in our Family Bible's and the people on our faith's Family Tree ... the saints who showed us kindness, taught us faith, raised us to be generous the people who in spite of their flaws, and more often, by means of their struggles, taught us what it means to live not by perfection, but to live by faith alone. Amen.