

Who Are Your People?

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I Samuel 3: 1-10

Matthew 1: 1-16

January 17, 2010

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“Who are her people?” This was a question I often heard as a child when I hung around the grownups. I can remember sitting outside in the yard at my grandmother’s house in Fayetteville, shelling butterbeans with an assortment of female relatives. It was a time of catching up on all the local news; who had gotten married, who had gotten into trouble, given birth, or died. Everyone seemed to know the characters who figured into these stories, and if someone didn’t immediately recognize a name, then she would ask for the information that would put the unfamiliar person into context: “who are her people?” One’s identity hinged on one’s extended family. Aunt Margie might not know Letha Yancey, my mother’s friend, but she did know the Yancey’s over in Clinton who were Letha’s relatives, and that was enough for Aunt Margie. Letha was no longer unfamiliar or unknown. Her identity was shaped by a complicated network of kinship and family relationships.

The first chapter of the gospel of Matthew is an answer to this same question, a question that first century readers would have asked about Jesus: “Who are his people?” It is a genealogy that attempts to help establish Jesus’ identity and tries to set this radical prophet in a context that would be familiar to those who were hearing of him for the first time. For Matthew, Jesus is a true descendent of David and Abraham, As such, he is the long-awaited Messiah, not just for the Jews, but for all of humankind. Now remember, the names in this recital of ancestors don’t necessarily have genetic or historical accuracy. That is not Matthew’s intent. He is attempting to capture a theological truth, and he is careful to include some very particular people in his list in order to make his point.

When the writer of Matthew composed his gospel, the early church had been in existence for some decades. Even so, it was already facing the tensions that are true to form for most human institutions. There were those who wanted to draw lines that controlled who could get in and who could hold positions of leadership.

Righteous Jewish males were free to enter with no questions asked, but if you were a foreigner (which is to say, in that day, non-Jewish) or if you had a less than perfect past, or if you were a woman, well, you might get *in*, but it would definitely be the back row for you! We have to remember that the dominant culture of the day was very patriarchal. One of the common prayers of the Pharisees, the esteemed upholders of Jewish law, was this prayer of thanksgiving: "I thank you, God, that you have made me neither Gentile, slave, nor a woman."

And then there is the issue of non-Jews and people of mixed ancestry. Deuteronomy spells out a clear example. Chapter 23:3 says "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord forever." Obviously, if you had any Moabite ancestry, you wouldn't be on the inside track.

Into this dominant culture of patriarchy and Jewish nationalism, Jesus came preaching the love of God to women as well as men, to Jew and Gentile alike, to the poor and outcast, even to one's enemies. And so his genealogy is the precursor to his gospel of inclusivity, equality, and sister/brotherhood. This is a list that includes not only the names of the great male patriarchs, but also the names of women: women like Ruth, the Moabite foreigner, and Rahab, the prostitute.

Compare this to Luke's genealogy which lists 52 men and no women. Matthew makes sure to mention particular women five times in his list, and by mentioning Ruth, he is proudly proclaiming foreigners as part of the great work of God in human history.

The list also contains an uncomfortable reminder that the great King David used treachery to kill a good soldier and steal his wife, a woman whom David wanted for himself. There are names included that intentionally point out that the progenitors of the Messiah were far from perfect. In the first fourteen generations, almost every one of the ten commandments is shattered. These were flawed, human beings, but they were all included in the universal arc of God's grace.

In the beginning of his gospel, Matthew summarizes hundreds of years of God's activity, urging his listeners and urging us to hear how this good news is founded on inclusivity, equality, and grace. He sets the stage for what comes next, as he shows how these marks of God's radical realm are all embodied and come together in the life of Jesus, who is called the Christ.

Identity and context. Family roots and personal vocation. What can I learn from my own trail of ancestors? What are the lessons for me from my own family tree? Lately, I've been doing genealogical research to answer the question, "Who are her people?" about myself. This has been a treasure hunt that has yielded some fascinating surprises.

My paternal grandfather had black hair, high cheekbones, and olive skin. We would joke with him about his ethnic heritage, and he would only say that his name "Cumbee" used to be "MacCumbee" until his grandfather dropped the "Mac", and that he was of Scottish descent. Sometimes he would throw in an enigmatic reference to an "Indian Princess", while his sister said she had always been told that the family was Portuguese.

My cousin and I started looking into our genealogy a few years ago and discovered that the Scottish story was a complete fabrication. Our name had indeed been changed over the years, but it used to be "Cumbo", not "MacCumbee", and our paternal ancestors were all listed as mulatto or "Free People of Color" on census records that went back to 1790. Further research showed that our ancestor Cannon Cumbo, was a mixed race man who lived in Charleston and Robeson County. An affidavit was sworn and filed in Charleston court in 1804 where members of society attested to the fact that Cannon's wife, Alley, was treated as if she were white. Cannon and his children were also listed in the Lumbee Tribal records in Robeson County, and were treated as Native Americans in that community.

Cannon's grandson, Isom, was my great-great grandfather. Isom and his son, Kenneth, moved to the Green Swamp area of Brunswick County where they were able to buy several hundred acres of farmland. Apparently, this was an isolated community of several tri-racial families, and they were able to co-exist relatively peacefully with the whites, Native Americans and African-Americans living in the area. The backwoods and swamps of Town Creek in Brunswick County was a place where families of mixed ancestry could live away from the racial persecution that occurred in more populous areas.

Recently, we were able to trace the Cumbo line even further back to Emanuel Cambow, an Angolan who was probably one of the first Africans brought to the new Virginia Colony. He probably came on a Portuguese slaving ship which was intercepted by the English and re-routed to Jamestown. These Africans, described by colonist John Rolfe, were probably people from Ndongo, captured by the Portuguese in their war against Angolan chieftains. As you can imagine,

I now have a special interest in the history, geography and people of Angola, particularly since I discovered there is a town there with the name of “Cumbo”!

During the early years of the Virginia colony, captured Africans were not necessarily made into permanent slaves, but were often indentured servants who could earn their freedom in 7 to 10 years, just as the white workers did who were also hired to work the tobacco plantations. My ancestor, Emanuel, was released from indentured service in 1667 was able to obtain 50 acres of land near James City or Jamestown. His descendents intermarried with the English and Native populations and gradually moved south to the new colony of North Carolina, ending up in the swamplands of Brunswick County.

When I discovered this hidden family history, I urged my father to take a DNA test that is now an option for many people who are interested in their ethnic ancestry. I gave him a test kit for his 75th birthday a year ago, and we all waited eagerly to hear the results of the Y DNA test that would indicate the ancestral homeland and ethnic origins of his paternal line, his father’s father’s father, and on back through thousands of years. Turns out he is a match for Haplogroup B, one of the oldest population groups in the world, originating in sub-Saharan and West Africa. On the ancestry website where the DNA results are posted, we enjoyed finding close DNA matches with others who share our genetic make-up, many of whom are African.

Discovering this family secret of a mixed-race past has had a deep emotional impact on me. I wonder what it would have been like to live in the South during the last two hundred years, either hiding one’s racial identity in an attempt to “pass” as white, or living openly in isolated communities where racial mixtures were more common and accepted. I thought about the small family cemetery in the woods of Brunswick county where the Cumbee graves were covered with conch shells. Could this be an Indian custom or one that was brought over from Angola?

A photo taken at the turn of the century shows my grandfather’s family: some of his siblings look white, some have Native American facial structures, and the sister who stands behind him faces the camera with decidedly African features, darker skin and her black hair, thick and curly. How were they treated in the community of Town Creek? Did they ever travel to Southport or Wilmington? Did they have African-American friends or relatives who were killed in the 1898 Wilmington race riots?

I wonder how many Americans have mixed race ancestry, and my guess is that it might be many of us. There are mixed race celebrities and famous figures in the news and history books: people like Colin Powell, W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Adam Clayton Powell; musicians such as Bob Marley, Mariah Carey, and Jimi Hendrix, actors like Vin Diesel, Johnny Depp, Cameron Diaz, and Halle Berry; athletes such as Tiger Woods and Derek Jeters. And of course, our country’s first biracial President, Barack Obama. We’ve come a long way!

Our uniquely American genealogies show that many of us are hybrids, amalgamations of a multitude of ethnic and racial strains. Like Jesus’ family tree, our ancestry is composed of countless folks who would have been the marginalized ones of their times, living outside the white power structures. Many of our own ancestors would have been like Ruth, the Moabites of their day.

Just as Jesus’ ancestry was symbolic of his work for inclusivity, equality, and a compassionate society, so our own mixed heritage is a reminder that we should embody these traits in our own place and time. We should share the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., his vision that all children

will one day live in a world where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

As King wrote in his last Christmas sermon, “Now let me suggest that if we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribes, our class, and our nation.... we must either learn to live together as brothers (and sisters) or we are all going to perish together as fools. It really all boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny.”

King said it so well. He reminded us that that we are all family, and we are called to be our best human selves. Jesus’ family tree not only gave him identity, but also his vocation, his calling. The question of “Who am I?” inevitably leads to “What is it I am to do?” Some people of faith think of this as responding to a divine call. The story of Samuel is a classic illustration. A young boy hears a voice calling him, one he can’t identify, one that no one else can hear. He is fortunate to have a wise teacher who tells him to heed this voice, as it is likely the divine nudging of a God who is not only Lord of the Heavens but also the still, small voice within the human heart.

This is my favorite part of the story. God’s call to Samuel is not a proclamation to a wider audience. It was probably an internal whisper in his dreams in the darkness of night. His response was the right one: “Speak, Lord; your servant is listening”.

A Yup’ik Eskimo song also describes this mysterious pull from beyond:

*He sings to me
And calls my name from somewhere up there
Over there, from somewhere here,
From the depths of our minds.*

*(“The Call of the Story”, Suzanne Jasper, **Parabola**, vol. XIX, no. 1, 1994.)*

God's call is that singing we hear from a place we can't quite identify, somewhere up there, over there, from the depths of our hearts and minds.

A couple of years ago, I attended a retreat for nonprofit leaders called "Connecting Role and Soul". It was a time of journaling, discussion, and reflecting on readings by the Quaker educator and writer, Parker Palmer. One of the insights which Palmer expressed is that many of us with traditional religious upbringings believe that God always calls us to do something noble, or difficult, or even downright unpleasant. He writes:

I first learned about vocation growing up in the church. I value much about the religious tradition in which I was raised...But the idea of vocation I picked up in those circles created distortion until I grew strong enough to discard it. I mean the idea that vocation, or calling, comes from a voice external to ourselves, a voice of moral demand that asks us to become someone we are not yet- someone different, someone better, someone just beyond our reach.

Today I understand vocation quite differently- not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received...Vocation does not come from a voice "out there" calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice "in here" calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.

*(Parker Palmer, **Let Your Life Speak**, Jossey-Bass, 2000, pp. 9-11.)*

We have each been given a uniquely different identity, a birthright gift. And we are being called to our true vocation. God's call doesn't come to us from "out there", but from "in here", in the heart, urging us to be the persons we were born to be.

What is our calling, on this day, in this place? After the events of this week, two answers are clear to me. We continue to be called to carry on the work of racial justice and peacemaking that was Martin Luther King's vocation 50 years ago. And we are called to respond generously to the plight of our brothers and sisters in Haiti who are facing unbelievable suffering in the wake of last Tuesday's earthquake. As a fellow pastor said so well: "An earthquake devastating one of the poorest nations in the world is not an "act of God" The acts of God are the thousands of responses of love, generosity, service, and care that follow such a disaster. May we all be "acts of God" not just after a disaster, but every day." (Rachel Wangen-Hoch).

God calls each of us to our true vocation, one in which we work for a world where all are included and cherished, a world where justice flows like a river and righteousness like an everlasting stream. May it be a world where your people are my people, and we can sit together in the yard on a summer evening because we have family ties! Amen.