

First Presbyterian Church Wausau, WI
Tribe, Clan, Family, Kin: It's All Relative – November 22, 2015
Genesis 49:1-28 and Ephesians 2:11-22
Rev. Rachel A. Wann

I have not always been interested in genealogy, but I do come by it naturally. My dad's father, Hubert Wann was very interested in family history and did as much research as he could before the days of ancestry dot com. It involved lots of letter writing and phone calls. Unfortunately he died when I was two, so I never knew him or my grandmother, but I knew that the Wann's came from Germany and I had always heard that grandma's people came from England and Germany.

On my mom's side of the family, her mother's parents were German immigrants who arrived as teens, settled in Chicago, and got married. My mother's parents divorced when she was five years old, and grandma remarried and Mom was adopted by her step-father. It has only been in the last six years that I knew anything about her biological father. I told you the story a month or so ago about how I found Mom's two younger half-brothers living in Oklahoma City.

Now, I've always had a small family. I have one older brother. Growing up I never knew my cousins on Dad's side as they were much older, married, and lived far away. And of course, I never knew my cousins on Mom's side. So for me, family was very small group of people. Six years ago I took a trip to Oklahoma City at Christmastime to meet my extended family – including six female cousins, five of whom were married with kids. All of a sudden I was surrounded by people. Lots of people. My people. And I wanted to learn more.

My uncles, Jim and John Best, filled me in with what they knew and showed me a family tree that had been researched by a cousin in Canada. Suddenly, mixed with all my German blood, I found Scottish and Irish ancestors. And that is when my interest in genealogy took off, and, like so many other people, I quickly discovered what an exciting hobby it is.

Why do so many people have such an interest in learning about their family's past? For me it is a connection to something much larger than myself. It gives me a sense of belonging, that I am not completely alone in my existence. It's thrilling to find an ancestor who has some claim to fame. We are quick to share about our ties to royalty or celebrity. As if somehow their deeds boost our own level of fame. As if our gene pool is just a little bit richer than the average person's. On the other hand, it is not so thrilling to discover ancestors that were famous or known for less honorable deeds.

For example, when I created a subscription to the ancestry website, I began digging deep into my roots. I had always thought that my ancestors were all northerners, having settled in Indiana and Chicago. I found direct ancestors who fought in both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War – on the side of the north. But when I looked more closely at my Dad's mother's people, I discovered that her grandfather came to Indiana from North Carolina. His father fought in the Civil War – on the side of the south. And he was a slave-holder.

Now I am not really sure why that bothers me so much. I suppose in the same way that so-called successful ancestors give me a boost up, the negative actions of other ancestors knock me down a bit. Just as we are as individuals, a sum total of all our actions, inactions, and decisions, so too, our roots are filled with individuals who were just as human and just as flawed.

When we look at the reading from Genesis this morning, we witness a father Jacob blessing his twelve sons. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, who God had promised to be the ancestors of multitudes. God had given Jacob a new name – Israel – and through him, God would form a people. Prior to his death, Jacob called for his twelve sons to come to him to receive his blessing. In his blessing he recounted some of their past actions, both good and bad, and how those actions would impact their futures. Their lives and the lives of their descendants would be full of both successes and failures. These twelve sons became the twelve tribes of Israel. These tribes were the people of God, about whom the Old Testament was written.

For centuries God worked with the tribes, the people of Israel, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, giving them the Law and the Promised Land, establishing a covenant with them and sending the Prophets to remind them how to live together peacefully, serving God and one another. We know how that turned out. In their stories we see both the good and the bad – and we celebrate the faithful witness of flawed people.

Then in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul extended God's family to reach beyond the twelve tribes, beyond the people of Israel. Paul brought the good news of Jesus Christ to the gentiles, those who were not Jews. Suddenly God's family expanded to include all people. In Christ, God gave a new covenant, a promise of hope, that was now available to all people. No longer was there a division between Jew and non-Jew.

But of course, we are still human, and we are still drawn to our groups. The history of the Christian Church is rife with disagreements and divisions. The Orthodox Church split from the Roman Church. The Reformation birthed the split between Catholics and Protestants. And even the Reformation led to three main divisions of Protestants – the Lutherans, the Reformed and the Anabaptists. We Presbyterians are descended from the Reformed Tradition as it was brought to Scotland by John Knox.

And that brings us here today. Celebrating our history as we were born out of those Scottish Presbyterians. And those of us with Scottish ancestors can acknowledge our clan affiliation- I am proudly wearing the colors of the Forsyth clan – my great, great, great grandmother Hellen Forsyth - and those of us without Scottish ancestors have been adopted into a clan today.

But the thing about Christianity is that even though we like to divide into our various groups, in Christ we have been adopted into the family of God. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. Indeed we are

part of the entire human family. We are the sum total of our humanity as we have been redeemed in Christ. So today, let us celebrate our heritage – we are part of God’s family, and we are kin to one another.