

Deoxyribonucleic Acid ...

...or DNA, is a self-replicating material that carries the essential stuff of you through each stage of your life, and passes it on, in some form or another, to all your descendants.

Are you excited about where this sermon is going yet?

DNA means that no matter how much you have changed as a person in the last 10, 20, 50 years—whether you’ve changed your mind once, changed political parties, religious beliefs, spouses, names, genders, or literally anything else that you might have changed about yourself, your DNA has stayed constant. At some biological level, at least, you’re always you, thanks to DNA. And ... however you may feel about them, your parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc are always yours, thanks to DNA.

I was in a pastoral support group led by your former Pastor, Glenn Doak this week, and he asked a question about what he called the DNA of our congregations. Of course, churches don’t have actual, biological DNA that we can examine, but we do have foundational experiences, stories, values, and motivations. What gives any church its distinctive identity?

My first ordained call in ministry was to a 125 year old congregation in the farmland of the Sacramento Valley. The church was part of the United Church of Christ, which wasn’t formed until 1957, so the foundational DNA of that church was from the German Evangelical tradition. It was founded by and for the German speaking farmers who had

settled in that region. Services were held in German until WWII, and Christmas Eve remained a German language service until 1991. The first baptism I presided over—not in German, just to be clear—was a CHILD NAMED Curtis, the 6th generation of his family to be baptized in that church, four generations in the chancel that morning. At least a few other families traced back to those founding German Farmers, and they still basically ran the place!

John 9 is kind of like a DNA refresher, not for this church or that church, but for the whole church—why is there a distinctly Christian Religion? And I know you Sunday school purists out there—Leslye—are ready to yell out old faithful, “Jesus!”

But remember that Jesus is Jewish. He lives and dies a Jew, and there is no distinctly Christian church in existence until well after his death. For the first at least decade or so after the first Easter, the confession of Jesus as the messiah is a claim that he is the Jewish Messiah.

Converts to the way of Jesus are either already Jews, or they have people breathing down their necks telling them its time to get circumcised. So that’s a part of the church’s DNA—we might say that the synagogue is an ancestor in the faith—but it’s not yet the distinctively Christian Church.

John writes his gospel some 60 or 70 years after Jesus death, and it is the experience of his community of faith that is given voice in this story—particularly, that of being aposynogogos—cast out of the synagogue.

Prior to this story, there is no such thing as a Jewish person being cast out of the synagogue, even though plenty of them have been following of Jesus. But by the 9th chapter of John's gospel the religious leaders reach a breaking point. They decide that they have to put a stop to the disruption that this new messianic sect is causing. So they exercise the nuclear option. The miraculously healed man's parents are afraid to speak up, the text says, because the leaders had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the messiah would be aposynogogos, for to confess Jesus as messiah and worship him as such would be to depart in their understanding into a new religion.

And from all angles, I get it. If I'm a leader of the synagogue, I'm probably trying to quash that reformation too. If I'm the man's parents, I'm probably not too keen on speaking up in defense of Jesus either.

But the man whose eyes were opened ... who has essentially no option but to tell the truth about himself and his experience, no matter how self-incriminating it may be. It is this formerly blind man who precisely in his abandonment and rejection becomes the occasion for the new church.

It is easy to think of this as a simple switch from one team to another, but consider the experience. For his whole adult life, this man has been confined to begging. While he and his family technically belong to the synagogue, their belonging is always with an asterisk, for as Jesus' disciples make clear, blindness in that culture was attributed to sin, and being a labeled a

sinner keeps even the right people on the margins.

When he is finally driven out, the leaders sneer at him: you were born entirely in sin ... and I have to imagine a lifetime of the trauma of reluctant acceptance and rushes back over him.

Jesus ... hears about it.

Like the good shepherd in search of a lost sheep, he goes and finds the healed but now untethered man, and it is only here that we see for the very first time, the distinctively Christian church.

There is a confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and then as the only person in 21 chapters of John's gospel to ever do so, this one who was lost, but is now found ... this one who was blind, but now sees, worships Jesus.

How is that for a DNA refresher, Church?

At a core, foundational 'what makes the church the church' level—the church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual home for exiles, outcasts, refugees. It is more than that, even in this story ... but it is never less.

I want to share a little bit about the ministry at the PSC over the last few years. When I arrived in August of 2018, we were probably 80% made up of students who had grown up in PC(USA) congregations. In three years, the ministry has grown over 300% from that previous Spring, but the total number of PCUSA Students has remained about the same so that today they make up just under a quarter of our ministry. Three quarters are Baptists of various stripes,

non-denominational, Catholic, Lutheran, and no religious affiliation.

And while not all of these came to the PSC as a haven from some sting of rejection by their home church, at least a handful are here for exactly that reason. In a one on one conversation, some would flatly deny anything like a confession of orthodox trinitarian faith...

When Jesus asks the formerly blind man 'do you believe in the Son of Man?' his initial response is "What? Who's that?"

Every week at the end of our worship service we serve communion saying some version of these words: This is not a Presbyterian table or a UCC table—it is not even a Christian table—it is Christ's table. And Christ's invitation extends to all the world including you. If you desire to take part in his life, death, and new life, you are welcome to do so here.

And would you believe it? Every week, every single atheist, agnostic, and uncertain about what my religious beliefs are at this particular moment in my life in that chapel hears those words, and comes forward after sitting through a whole Christian worship service—to receive the grace that has been given them—the gifts of god, for each and every one of us, the people of God.

We go to great lengths not to trick people into participating in a sacrament they have no interest in, because George Stroup, my theology professor, was insistent that if we are going to have an open table we needed to be go to such great lengths. But do you know what I've learned in this call—it's not the sacramental theology that draws most

people to Christ's table—its' the wide welcome.

I don't know if some of these folks will ever confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. All I can say is that at least they know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is a community in which they belong unconditionally because of people who do.

That and ... DNA is the self-replicating material, which carries the essential stuff that makes you you—that makes church church—and passes it on from generation to generation.

To God be the glory, in the church and in the world, this day and forevermore. Amen.