

May 13, 2018
1 John 5:9-12
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“In Our Blood”

Good morning! This is, as you know, Mother’s Day. Great Britain and Canada have their own dates for Mother’s Day, but here in US many of us will be sending or receiving cards, buying flowers or going out to lunch. All fine things. The Christian calendar was set without reference to these observances, but I believe there is a convergence of themes of family and testimony and the work of the Holy Spirit in today’s text; at least that’s what the Spirit has been up to for me. I’ll see if I can weave these strands together for you this morning. I believe our challenge is to consider how we can give testimony to Christ with one voice, when we each have a unique experience because of who we are and how our families have shaped us. I want to consider how our identity is related to our testimony.

We’re stepping away from the book of Acts today, but there’s still a lot about the Spirit here in 1 John, at least in the verse immediately preceding the ones which Cathy read for us today. Here’s a little bit of context for 1 John and our text from chapter 5. 1 John is the first of a collection of writings: the others are 2 John and 3 John -- go figure. 2 and 3 John quite short -- they take up less than a page in my Bible -- and they are actually written as letters. 1 John was likely written as an essay or a homily, and it’s longer. You are probably familiar with 1 John 4:8, even if you don’t know the chapter and verse: the last half of it says, “God is love.” I bet some of you know the song; Sing it with me if you want -- you can find the word in 1 John chapter 4 When I say knoweth and loveth I’m not lisping -- it’s the King James version: “Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God and everyone who loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He two loveth not knoweth not God for God is love. Beloved, let us love one another 1 John 4:7-8.”

1 John was written around 100CE, 70 years after Jesus' death, and enough time for the church to be started, grow, and get into trouble -- external with the Roman Empire, and internal with squabbling and false teaching. The message of 1 John is that one cannot truly believe in Jesus Christ without truly and selflessly loving other believers. The author of 1 John uses the image of family to explain how Christians should feel about one another. Chapter 5 verse 1 says, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child." I'm totally on board with the believing that Jesus is the Christ part of that statement, but experiencing as I have the complexity of human relationships, I'm here to tell you that "everyone who loves the parent loves the child" is not as simple as it sounds. Family relationships are a great metaphor because everyone is a child of *someone's*, but those relationships are complex, and different for each of us -- even for children with the same parents. Hang on to that family image while we tackle a few more verses from 1 John 5.

Verses 6-8 say "This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with water only but with water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. There are three that testify; the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree." Kind of a curious reference. What is the Spirit up to? There is a folk saying which I'm sure you've heard which says Blood is thicker than water. That means that our loyalties to family -- our blood relatives -- are stronger than our loyalties to friends. This explains why you can tease your little brother one minute, then turn around and fight to defend him against someone else. Nobody picks on my little brother (except me). Blood is thicker than water. I understand from my medical student daughter that family is literally in our blood. Not only that she has chosen the same profession as her father, and that her parents' genetic material is in her blood, but the blood of her baby is now also in her blood. This is amazing stuff. And although biblical writers wouldn't have known this level of biology, they understood blood as a symbol of life, the stuff which gives us vitality and energy. Sacrifice was an offering of life.

Shared blood should be a good thing for families, but what about other things we've inherited from our blood relatives, or the families we're a part of? Not just genetic tendencies or traits, but other things

which are passed on to us -- family systems and patterns? What about the stuff we didn't ask for from our families? What about the stuff we don't want? Do those things determine who we are, or can those things ever change?

I had the opportunity to hear a live performance of a cover of a John Mayer song last week, and I have been haunted by these lyrics, which pose a lot of difficult questions. The song is called In the Blood, and here are some of the questions:

**How much of my mother has my mother left in me?
How much of my love will be insane to some degree?
And what about this feeling that I'm never good enough?
Will it wash out in the water, or is it always in the blood?**

**How much of my father am I destined to become?
How much like my brothers, do my brothers wanna be?
Does a broken home become another broken family?
Or will we be there for each other, like nobody ever could?
Will it wash out in the water, or is it always in the blood?
I can feel love the I want, I can feel the love I need
But it's never gonna come the way I am
Could I change it if I wanted, could I rise above the flood?
Will it wash out in the water, or is it always in the blood?**

I believe that this song and 1 John 5 are both using images of water and blood to wrestle with the same question of *identity*. Who am I? What makes me who I am, and how much choice do I have about that? Our individual stories -- of our biological families, families of origin, or the families we've made for ourselves -- all shape who we are. Blood is what we've inherited, and water is what we've experienced. John (the biblical one, not John Mayer) adds another element and another story to the mix of blood and water, one which suggests that our identity can be more than either our inheritance or our experience: For John, water is a reference to baptism, blood to the crucifixion of Christ, and to those, John adds Spirit: the power of testimony which came upon the early church. There is our story -- human testimony -- but there is also the testimony of God. The testimony of God is always greater than human testimony; this is the great story of which every Christian story is a part. It is this

testimony which makes us family -- the Spirit which gives us life; the Spirit which is thicker than water and stronger than blood. The testimony of God is not a book or a set of commands, or even timeless theological truths: the testimony of God is a person. A person who is so closely related to God, that when we the Son, we also see the Father. This person is Jesus Christ, and everyone who believes in Jesus Christ is a child of that same Father. Our past experience has been washed by the waters of baptism and we can begin again, and what is in our blood is the blood of Jesus which was given for each one of us. That's what makes us part of God's family, God's children. And all of God's children have the testimony of Christ in our hearts. And this is the testimony -- I'm quoting this straight out of 1 John 5:11-12 -- God gave us eternal life; and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Each testimony will be different, because we are different people with different stories. But we share the same promise of eternal life, and the same identity as children of God. We are not condemned by our family's sins, nor are we saved by our family's faith. We are not condemned by our past, nor are we saved by our own good works. Our identity is in the water of baptism, the blood of the crucifixion, and the power of the Spirit to make us children of God. It is a testimony we are called to make with one voice, but that will always be a chorus of voices singing the same song with different parts and different harmonies.