

“This Is Us: Our Roots”
Matthew 1:1-17

This Scottish Heritage weekend celebration has caused some friction in my house. Mike was convinced that it was a good idea to take our Scottish Fold cat, Mr. Whiskers (picture of Whiskers on the screen) to the festival on Saturday. He remembered that we had a leash and a Scottish outfit for him and he thought that it would be great to take Whiskers to the festival because of his Scottish breed. I, on the other hand, did not think that this was such a great idea because Whiskers is 13 years old (75 in human years) and does not care to be in the car at all, let alone be put on a leash. Part of the issue is that Mike loves everything Scottish. That is his ancestral heritage. He has been overwhelming me for a few months with ideas of what we needed to do for the festival. It means a lot to him to celebrate our connection as a church to our Scottish ancestors. Try as I may, I can't get myself as a Syrian American to be that interested in Scottish culture even though I love the bagpipes playing in the service and love a lot of the history of our connection to the Presbyterian Church in Scotland.

This reminds me of “This Is Us” and Rebecca Pearson’s struggle to bond with her adopted son, who is African American and looks so different from her other two children which were her biological children. Even though he was supposed to be part of the triplets, she just could not bond with him (scene).

In addition to the grief of losing one of the triplets, Rebecca had to learn to connect with her adopted son with his own uniqueness. Being connected to him did not mean that he was just going to be like the rest of her family. He had his own roots and background that were an important part of his identity. What ends up helping Rebecca was a visit with her adopted son’s biological father who gives her the advice of giving the child a name that claims part of his story of origin instead of ignoring it. She ends up naming him after his birth father’s favorite poet, Dudley Randall. (scene)

Part of our identity is claiming what makes us unique while at the same time celebrating our universal connection to one another. This is what the author of the Gospel of Matthew does with his genealogy of Jesus. Even though it is a boring part of the story of Jesus, it is an important part of this Gospel. The author tries to connect Jesus back to the great ancestors of the people of Israel like David and Abraham. He tries to tell his readers that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah they had been waiting for and his lineage is evidence of that. Genealogies were very important to the Jews at the time of Jesus. For example, in order for a man to be a priest, it was important to establish that he came from an unbroken line of priest (the tribe of Levi). Even if a woman was to marry a priest, her genealogy would have to show that she was purely Jewish for at least five generations. Also, many predictions in the Hebrew scriptures showed that the Messiah would come from the line of David.

At the same time we hear about how Jesus is a descendant of Abraham and King David, the author of Matthew does an amazing thing. Jesus’ lineage and connection to the line of David is through adoption by his stepfather Joseph. In addition, the author

highlights some “foreign” women as an important part of his lineage. It is highly unusual to include women in a genealogy in a very patriarchal culture. As the old saying goes, “well-behaved women never make history,” these women were extremely subversive. Also, highlighting foreign women was not a badge of honor. We hear about Tamar the Adullamite who was taken by her father-in-law as a prostitute (Genesis 38:15), Rahab the Canaanite prostitute (Joshua 2:1) who helps Israelite spies, Ruth the Moabite who marries Boaz to help her mother-in-law (Ruth 3), Bathsheba the wife of Uriah the Hittite whom David forces into adultery, and Mary, pregnant before her marriage to her betrothed Joseph.

This is a rather unusual way of presenting a genealogy. There are many scholarly speculations about the motivations of the Gospel writer, but today I would like to invite us to consider how his choice of including the unique and universal lineage of Jesus serves as a model for us in understanding ourselves and our human connections. On the one hand, we are unique because of things like our cultures, heritage, language, religion, gender, and family stories. We are uniquely who we are because of these things that make us different and that is something to be celebrated and understood. At the same time, according to the good news of Jesus, we are also universally connected to all the people of the earth through our common humanity. Even on the genetic level, there is no unique race but the human race. The things that hold us together with other human beings are far greater than the things that make us different. While we celebrate our 209th anniversary as a church, we also celebrate that we are part of a larger story which is 2000 years old and is connected to the global church and ultimately to the human family who shares with us this quest for the spiritual.

So what does that mean for us today? How does the specific and universal message of Jesus get lived out in and through us? We each need to know and celebrate our unique faith, families, our roots, connections, cultures, and whatever makes us uniquely who we are. At the same time, we need to celebrate the universal nature of our human experience which binds us together with the whole earth. The old adage “Think globally and act locally” for our faith and our connections. Also, we can see that our connections are not limited to the people who are alive today. Our unique roots and our ancestors matter. Yet future generations matter. We celebrate our past, but we also look to how God is calling us into the future. We are part of this large web of humanity that includes not just our time, but eternity as well.

This reminds me of the giant sequoia trees in California (Image of sequoia trees on screen) and how each of them is unique, but their roots are so important because they are connected. Some of these trees are as tall as a skyscraper, but they have roots practically at surface level. A solitary sequoia’s roots are so shallow that it can hardly withstand a strong breeze. So how do they grow so tall? They spring up in groves, and their roots intertwine. In other words, they lock into each other and hold each other up - they give each other the strength necessary to withstand the angriest winds. And that is the power of our human connections and our human roots. They give us both the uniqueness of who we are, but also the common bond that we share as a human family.

This is what Kevin in “This Is Us” reflects on through his painting. “The painting was first introduced in episode five of Season One. It’s a piece that Kevin painted because, as he tells his nieces Tess and Annie, every time he gets a new script, he paints how it makes him feel. The resulting monologue where he explains the meaning behind the layered spatters of colorful paint basically encapsulates the entire premise of “This Is Us.”

Kevin sharing the painting of life:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xh-Tof_QxKU

(for the second service) This is what Kevin says, “I painted this because I felt like the play was about life, and life is full of color and we each get to come along and we add our own color to the painting, you know? And even though it’s not very big—the painting—you sort of have to figure that it goes on forever, you know, in each direction? So, like, to infinity, you know. ‘Cause that’s kinda like life,” says Kevin. He starts pointing to different parts of the painting, saying that maybe this is where his great-grandfather’s part of the painting, and then another corner is his part of the painting. “And then I started to think, what if we’re all in the painting, everywhere? And what if we’re in the painting before we’re born? What if we’re in it after we die? And these colors that we keep adding, they just keep getting added on top of one another, until eventually we’re not even different colors anymore. We’re just, one thing. One painting.”

Then he says something really powerful about our connection to those who have gone before us. He says, “My dad, he’s not with us anymore. He’s not alive, but he’s with us. He’s with me every day. It all just sort of fits somehow, even if you don’t understand how yet... I mean, it’s kind of beautiful, right, if you think about it, the fact that just because someone dies, just because you can’t see them or talk to them anymore, it doesn’t mean they’re not still in the painting,” he says. “I think maybe that’s the point of the whole thing. There’s no dying. There’s no ‘You’ or ‘Me’ or ‘Them.’ It’s just ‘Us.’” May it be so! Amen.