

“On Living into a New Story”  
Lent 3C (March 24, 2019)  
Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

Back in November, *The New York Times* did a special piece on DNA tests, like 23andMe and Ancestry. The at-home DNA tests were one of the hottest products purchased by Americans on cyber-Monday at the beginning of the holiday shopping season. The process is simple: buy the kit online, it ships to your home, swab the inside of your cheek, send the saliva sample back to the lab, and a few weeks later you get your results - your genetic story complete with percentages: 30% of this, 10% of that, 50% of something else, etc. etc. The results can sometimes upend family origin stories. Journalist Gina Kolata reported on a study conducted by 23andMe researchers, who examined the correlation between the race people claim to be and the “genetic markers” of that race in their DNA. “After examining data from 160,000 customers who agreed to participate [in the study],” writes Kolata, “the geneticists learned that 3.5 percent of those who said they were white actually had DNA that was 1 percent or more African in origin . . . . The chances of having African ancestry were highest in the South, and highest of all in South Carolina, where at least 13 percent of those who said they were white had African ancestors.”<sup>1</sup>

The November article included letters from readers who’d taken DNA tests, and then shared how those tests had changed their family stories.<sup>2</sup> Allison, from New York wrote that she was born in Pittsburgh and adopted in a closed adoption. “My family had heard from the adoption agent that my birth mother was Italian,” she writes. “No one ever really talked about my biological father. As far as I was concerned, I was Italian . . . . As I got older and traveled the world, strangers always thought I was a local wherever I went. In Spain, people assumed that I was Spanish. In Morocco, they thought I was Moroccan. . . . [After taking the 23andMe [DNA test] . . . , it turns out that I really am Italian - about 15 percent . . . . [But] on my biological father’s side, I learned that I am 55.2 percent Western Asian and North African . . . . I’ve spent 30 years of my life identifying as a white person,” writes Allison, and “I feel [a] disconnect between my DNA and having lived my whole life as a white woman. One thing I can say for sure,” she goes on, “is that having this new context has . . . made me empathize in a different way . . . . When I first heard about the Muslim ban [in 2017], my immediate instinct was to jump in a cab and head to the airport to protest. My DNA connection to [Muslim countries in North Africa] really triggered something in me that I wasn’t expecting.”

Franklin from San Francisco wrote that his wife ordered a 23andMe test for him and for his father. “When my wife mentioned to my mother that she was getting me the test,” he writes, “all the color drained from my mother’s face. So of course my wife thought, now I’m definitely getting the test. A few months later,” he says, “my parents requested a family meeting with me and my brother - something they had never done before. My brother wondered if my parents were getting a divorce. My mother started the meeting by saying she knew I was considering doing 23andMe. ‘As you know,’ she said, ‘we had trouble getting pregnant. But we thought you should know that we eventually mixed donor sperm with your

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/28/science/dna-tests-ancestry.html>

<sup>2</sup> Here’s the main story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/magazine/dna-test-black-family.html>

father's sperm. And once we got pregnant, we were so happy that we never looked back.' I was 33 [at the time]," writes Franklin, "and suddenly my whole origin story was up in the air. It's weird how impactful that is, even though nothing is really different ... ."

Brittany from New Orleans wrote, "I identify as Black, but here in New Orleans, people ... [call me] ... 'Creole ...'. [T]he results [of the DNA test] said that I am 50.2 percent European, 46 percent sub-Saharan African and the rest East Asian and Native American. ... The amount of European was just a shock to me, because I've always identified as black. ... Part of what has made this so hard for me is realizing that a lot of my DNA has to come from relations that weren't fair or weren't open [between slaves and slave owners.] ... Though I still identify as black, I [now] question whether I should be checking [the box] 'other' [when asked to identify my race]." (I'll share two more of these stories in a little bit.)

...In one of their Lenten devotionals for this year, Brian McLaren and Gareth Higgins say that the season of Lent is a time "to rethink the stories that frame our lives ... ." And in rethinking our stories, they say, "we will begin to live differently, and we will set a positive example for others to imitate." It's an interesting way to think about Lent - Lent as a time to *rethink* the stories that give us meaning and identity. I suppose it's like thinking of Lent as a spiritual DNA test that might change how we see ourselves. Today's scripture readings are all grounded in story. The prophet Isaiah in today's Old Testament reading offers a story of promised abundance given freely - "without money" - says Isaiah, offered freely from a God, whose grace cannot be bought, because it's a gift without strings attached. St. Paul in today's reading from First Corinthians places the early Christian story of salvation with its symbols of baptism and communion in the ancient storyline of Israel going all the way back to the Exodus. It's a way to situate the Christian story in the stream of something much bigger than itself. And Jesus in today's reading from Luke tells a story about a fig tree that wasn't yielding fruit. The vineyard owner wanted to cut it down, but was talked out of it by the vinedresser, who asked to give the tree another chance. Isaiah speaks of abundance and grace offered freely. Paul speaks of participating in a story that is much older and bigger than any of our individual stories. And Jesus speaks of God as giving second and third and fourth and fifth, *ad infinitum* chances.

Yes, maybe Lent is as Brian McLaren and Gareth Higgins say a time "to rethink the stories that frame our lives." Or, maybe a different way to put this is that Lent is a time to ask: in what, ultimately, do we place our trust? If you think about it, we place our trust in all sorts of things and people. Trust doctors to make the right diagnosis and prescribe the right medicine. Those doctors trust the research into new treatments. Researchers trust their methods to produce results that doctors can use to treat our ailments. We trust manufacturers to build cars and airplanes that can safely transport us. Those manufacturers have federal guidelines; and those standards are developed by engineers and by trial and error - crash test dummies and the like. We trust TCAT drivers whenever we board the bus; we trust their training, and trust that they themselves are in compliance with safety requirements when they drive. We trust that other people on the road will abide by traffic laws. We trust the FDA and local Wegmans workers to keep our food safe. We trust our financial institutions and those who manage our retirement accounts that they've been trained and certified, and that their methods don't overly expose our money to risk. We trust the contractors who work on our houses. We trust teachers and professors in classrooms; we trust lawyers to give us good counsel; and all of these occupations are themselves built on trust in systems of education and

certification and apprenticeship; and we trust that there are authorized people to keep track of it all. We trust all sorts of things - we have faith - faith in ideologies, like the ideology of meritocracy, that if we work hard we can improve our lives and those of our children.

Which is why stories like the recent indictments of parents, business leaders, and Hollywood celebrities on charges that they illegally tried to buy access for their children to our most elite colleges uncovers perhaps not just a soft underbelly in the system of trust, but also a sad story we can find ourselves participating in - a story about how our worth as human beings is measured in perceived achievements or in met goals or in letters after our names; that success is measured in the perception of status or of having money or connections. Opinion columnist Frank Bruni recently wondered about “the principles” being “instilled in our children” from this narrative about self-worth and achievement.<sup>3</sup> He came up with the following litany. We’re telling our children, he says, “That nothing in your life is too sacred to be used for gain. That you do what it takes and spend what you must to get what you want. That packaging matters more than substance. That assessments made by outsiders trump any inner voice.” After the admissions scandal story broke, one young woman admitted in an email to Bruni that she may have gained entrance to one of America’s top schools because her parents were large donors. She said her parents taught her that “‘My self-worth was based on where I went to school’.” Barry Schwartz, who taught psychology at Swarthmore College for decades said after his retirement that the story we’re teaching future generations to live into is a story that says “‘the measure of success is the badge you get.’” Reflecting on his time teaching journalism at Princeton in 2014, Bruni writes, “More than 45 students applied for [the course], each submitting [a writing sample]; I had to choose 16. Midway through the semester, I realized that many of them hadn’t turned in an assignment with as much polish and energy as that essay. I mentioned this to a few full-time professors there, who weren’t surprised. They explained that what many students glean from the admissions madness is that the supreme achievement - for which you tap your fiercest energy and summon your best self - is breaching an exclusive sanctum, getting through a narrow door. What you do inside the room pales in importance.”

I wonder what would happen if we placed such stories about measuring success and self-worth with badges alongside the stories from Isaiah and Paul and Jesus? Isaiah, speaks on behalf of God, and offers a lavish banquet completely free of charge. Free. Free from striving, from pressure, from benchmarks of success; free of badges. God’s offer is free and unconditional: there is no more stressing about trying to game the system or produce a polished curriculum vitae or pack another volunteer opportunity into a tight schedule in order to get ahead or prove self-worth. God just brushes all of that achievement-focused stuff to the side, and focuses on us. We have value not because of badges; we have value just because. And Paul teaches us to place our stories in bigger ones - bigger stories that don’t focus on the next thing to be done in the future: the next benchmark to reach, the box to check off on the “to do” list in order to feel accomplished and successful. No, Paul’s story looks in the other direction, looks to the past - to ancestors in faith, to symbols that have given meaning and to practices of faith that have sustained those who’ve gone before us. It’s a way of saying, “stop looking for meaning in life in the next accomplishment. Place your story in the context of something bigger and older than yourself.” And Jesus in today’s parable speaks of second and third and fourth chances. Or, to put this in the language of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/16/opinion/college-admissions-scandal.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>

story: with God there is no chance of failure. Doing more can't earn God's favor; faltering can't nullify God's favor. God's grace is free and freely offered again and again and again.

Let me close by sharing two DNA test stories that I think are stories about grace. The first is from Boo Navantu of Tampa, Florida. "My mother is Thai," she writes, "and became pregnant with me by an American soldier during the Vietnam War. I never knew who he was. She ended up marrying a different American: a man named William Smith, or Smitty . . . . Smitty was black, but I didn't realize that we weren't blood-related until the first grade. I called him my dad, and he raised me as his own. . . . I never knew racism until [we moved to] America. On the first day of first grade, other kids were like, 'He can't be your dad - he's black!' and I was like 'No, he's brown!' I didn't have a concept of what race even was. . . . Smitty died five years ago, [and then] . . . a friend gave me 23andMe for my birthday . . . . [M]y lineage came back half Thai and half Irish. It was a huge surprise. My friends were all like, 'Oh [wow] you're *Thairish*!' Then I found an aunt on the [web]site, who said her brother had been a soldier in Vietnam. I knew right away it was him. . . . I call Frank 'my new dad'. Our humor is identical. I also have three new half sisters . . . . Their whole side has red hair and freckles. . . . All of a sudden, [I was like] . . . 'I'm Irish! I want to go to Ireland. I need to learn how to drink! What if I have redheaded grandbabies?' . . . I [now] feel whole."

The final story is from Monique, a 75 year old woman from Irvine, California. "I was born in Nazi occupied France in 1942," she writes. "One of my earliest memories is of hiding from the Germans in a cave with my mother. . . . I grew up thinking that the American soldier my mother married was my biological father. When my mother finally told me the truth, that he was actually my stepfather, she mentioned that my biological father was a famous concert pianist. She said that they were resistance fighters and that he had been caught smuggling information for the Allies in his pianos. [After taking my DNA test I discovered that] I am about half Ashkenazi Jewish . . . . I had no idea I was Jewish . . . . My father . . . was a Holocaust victim . . . . It was shocking and moving. I knew I had a connection to the horrible events of World War II, but I did not realize the magnitude of the impact it had on my life. . . . It has changed my entire history, [and has helped me focus on] my heritage and the legacy I'm leaving to my children [and] grandchildren."

...Lent is a time to rethink the stories that give us meaning in life. And I think the most important story we tell ourselves in church is the story of grace. It takes many forms: welcoming everyone into our doors no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey; it's a story of being free from striving and from working for badges in order to prove our worth; it's a story that's bigger and older than any one of our individual stories; it's a story that says there is no "failing" when it comes to the things of God, because God accepts us just as we are. Amen.