

Earthy Spirituality

Jesus is Lord of Our Relationships

1 Chronicles chapters 1-9

April 15, 2007

I'm holding in my hands one of our numerous family picture albums. This volume contains an assortment of photos of people that matter to our family – children and parents, husbands and wives, of course, but also friends, extended family members, former church members. They're all in here. This is our family. (Open the book and give random examples of people that matter to the Woodley family). These are the people who are precious to us; the people who matter to us. And when I look at the entire album, I know that there's a story here. It reminds me who we are and who I am. It connects me with my past and gives me hope for the future.

In the Bible passage we'll explore this morning, God also has a family picture album; it's filled with some of the people in God's family of covenant love. Please turn with me to the first chapter of an Old Testament book called 1 Chronicles (it's found on page ____). Honestly, at first sight this doesn't look like an exciting and valuable portion of the Bible. Let me read the first few verses (read 1:1-9). I'll stop here because this sprawling list of names continues page after page after page. Nine chapters of genealogies! At this point you might be tempted to ask, "Why is it even in the Bible?" But keep in mind that to God this dry genealogy represents the equivalent of God's picture album. There's a story here. For ancient Jews names are people and people have faces and stories. They matter and they belong here. So what is the story behind the names and faces and what does that story tell us today?

First, here's the background to the story of 1 and 2 Chronicles. The time takes us back about 400 years before Jesus was born. A group of Jewish people had come back from a 70 year exile and they were trying to resettle, regroup and rediscover their spiritual identity. They were a minority under the shadow of the huge, all-consuming, trend-setting, world-shaping Persian Empire. They felt small and insignificant and forgotten. They still had a temple where they could experience the presence of God, but their new temple was smaller and uglier than the first temple. They also still felt a nagging sense that God was still punishing them for their past sins. And they felt cut off from their past and uncertain of their future. In our terms, they were experiencing a communal identity crisis which forced them to ask questions like: *Who are we? Should we just blend into the surrounding culture? Can we really make a difference? Can – and should – our children live different lives from our neighbors? Does our faith even matter at all?*

As they came back to the land from exile, this genealogical list was important as an administrative tool; but it was even more important as a spiritual tool. The author of Chronicles took the raw data, the statistics and lists of names, and he clearly had a purpose and focus. He was preaching a sermon and telling a story. And here's the sermon in a nutshell: Remember who you are! Look through this family album – God's family album – and remember that you belong to royal stock. There's spiritual nobility in

your soul. You have an unbelievable, life-altering, soul-transforming calling on your life. You matter to God.

Remember who you are because there's royalty in your blood. The preacher in Chronicles begins by pointing to some of the "big names" in God's picture album and God's family tree – David and Levi. First of all, notice the long list of David references that begin in chapter 3. Who was David and how would David's face in your family album help you? Initially, David was a complete nobody – a loner and a runt, the youngest brother in a long line of brothers. He was from a very small and insignificant tribe. And yet purely based on God's own grace, God chose to David to be the king over all of Israel and then God made a covenant with David. A covenant is essentially a two-sided agreement and promise. In the Bible when God makes a covenant he says, "I love you, I am your God, you are my people, and I will take care of you better than any other little god." That's why whenever I put anything before God – getting ahead at my job, making money, being a successful athlete or musician, or even my own children – I'm missing out on the very best deal in the universe: the joy and satisfaction of knowing God's covenant love. And whenever I don't help my children put God first in their lives, I'm really cheating my children; I'm helping them find less joy rather than more joy.

That's the story of God's covenant love and this family picture album puts David's face throughout this genealogy. David is the guy who symbolizes the covenant love and faithfulness of God. But we don't just need a covenant of love; we also need the assurance that our sins are forgiven. So this storyteller will also focus on one other big name in the rich family tree of the Jewish people: Levi. This genealogy (all of chapter 6 and most of chapter 9) is filled with references to Levi. Why Levi? The descendants of Levi became the Levites or the band of priests that assured God's people of the forgiveness of sins. They stood in the temple, worshipping, leading the people in worship, reminding and showing that the holy God of Israel cannot and will not tolerate our sins, and yet, he is so merciful that he will find a way to forgive our sins.

Now you might be saying, "Okay, that must have been good news for demoralized Jewish exiles who lived 2,400 years ago. So what? What does that have to do with my life?" There's exciting news for us too. The promise of David's covenant always pointed beyond itself to a greater covenant with a greater king – but still in the line of David (see Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-27). All over the Old Testament the promise rings out: a greater than David David-like figure will come. And the promise of Levi's tribe also pointed beyond itself to a better way to deal with our sins. The blood of bulls and lambs was never meant to be the final answer to the forgiveness of sins. Now notice something astounding: the very first verse in the New Testament begins like this: "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David..." And then a few verses later it says that Jesus will be named Immanuel for he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). Jesus is the fulfillment, the completion of both the line of David and the line of Levi. When you trust Christ you have both God's covenant love and God's assurance of forgiveness.

This genealogy will help us find our new identity as children of God. When Jesus died on the cross for our sins, it was for us, on our behalf, in our place. We matter to God. God wants to put you in His family picture album. It's so easy to slide into insignificance. Then we have to pump ourselves up with our achievements or our sexual fantasies or our relationships ... The Gospel gives us our significance: it's found in Christ, who we are in Christ. And in Christ we have been chosen and adopted and empowered with the Holy Spirit. In Christ we belong. In Christ we are forgiven – our past has been dealt with forever.

Sometimes we have a spiritual identity crisis. We forget who we are in Christ. John Westerhoff tells a fable about a baby lion that became lost and wandered into a family of lambs. After a while the lion started to baa just like the sheep and put his face in the grass and run away from danger just like the sheep. But one day when he was out munching grass along with all the little lambs he heard a huge roar. All the lambs scattered but for some reason he stayed. When the big lion finally arrived he looked at the little lion and said, "What are you doing here?" "Why I'm munching grass," said the little lion. The big lion asked, "But what is that pathetic noise you're making?" "O," said the little lion, "that's called a baa." So the big lion took the little lion over to a quiet pool of water and said, "Look at our faces." And the little lion said, "Wow, I'm just like you!" "Yes you are, said the big lion. Now you know who you are and whose you are." Start living like a lion."

Remember who you are, the Chronicler tells us: there's royalty in your blood. You are a son or a daughter of the Risen Christ – the greater than David and Levi combined. (See Ephesians 4:1-2).

Our storyteller preacher has another message: Remember who you are; you belong together. Notice that this family picture album and family tree doesn't just have a few big names; it also contains a sprawling kaleidoscope of men and women, old and young, high and low, Jews and non-Jews. In other words, God is bringing about that plan through a wildly diverse group of people. My friend Peter Esser – one of our elders here at TVC – wrote me this week and said, "These genealogies give a great sense that God is working in the world over many generations with many different people."

Notice that this is a very inclusive list. Some people in the days of Chronicles wanted to say, "Well, I'm happy to have this group of people, but I don't want them. I'm happy to have the tribes from the Southern Kingdom but I don't those moral failures from the Northern Kingdom. Or I like my friends from my generation but I don't want people from those older or newer generations." The preacher-storyteller of Chronicles never loses sight of the importance of Israelite unity. One of his favorite phrases is "all Israel." He wants the unity of God's people to run deep – across racial lines and age lines and socioeconomic lines.

I don't know if you noticed that we still have a big problem in this country. In the past week there were two major news stories that clearly reveal a massive racial divide in our nation. In the past week we watched two front-page major news stories: the firing of Don

Imus and the dropping of the charges against the Duke Lacrosse players. I really have nothing to say about whether these decisions were right or wrong, but what fascinated me – and disturbed me – was how different black Americans and white Americans viewed these issues. And what disturbed me was that I didn't have a clue why black Americans – especially young black women – would be so angry and upset. Do you? I realized that I don't have a clue. And I realized that, as a nation, we don't have a clue. We have our work cut out for us.

Am I being too sensitive? Am I overreacting? Can't we just say, "Look, this isn't our problem: I didn't make the mess and it's not my job to clean it up?" To which the Chronicle preacher and the New Testament (see especially the Book of Ephesians 2:11-22) would say, "This is your issue. You are the people of God. You are the church, the new and radically different community of God's people." From the beginning (that's why he starts with Adam – this goes back all the way to creation) God has had a plan: bring the all the nations and races and socioeconomic groups – not just my nation, my class, my race – into a relationship of covenant love. It includes all the nations on the earth. See verse 5, for instance. The seven sons of Japheth founded the people of Europe and northern Asia. From Javan comes Greek Ionia; from Gomer, the ancient Cimmerians of the Russian plains; from Madia, the Medes and Persians of Iran; from Tubal and Meschech were the ancestors of the inhabitants of the Turkish plateau. The four sons of Ham founded the ethnic groups of Africa and southwestern Asia. Notice a few other examples of inclusiveness: (2:17; 3:2; 4:18 and 2 Chronicles 6:32, 34).

A few weeks ago I shared a New Testament passage from the Book of Ephesians 4:1-3. How do we live a life that is worthy of Christ our Lord? We become unified. Is that easy? No, because Paul tells us to work at it – "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." Are you making every effort to include and embrace and understand people from different cultures or perspectives or generations? Do you try to understand what it's like to be non-white?

So the preacher, storyteller of Chronicles challenges us with big names and with a diverse group of names and people. But he also includes and emphasizes not just big names and diverse names; he also intentionally includes "little people" with "small names." And he tells all of these little people: Remember who you are! First there are little people like Tamar (2:4), a victim of incest, and Bathsheba (2:3), a foreign woman who had an affair with King David. Then I love the way this genealogy ends. It started with Adam and moved through Noah and Abraham and Moses and David – and all these great and famous and sparkling people. But then it moves into the grand finale of sparkling people in God's family picture album. Turn with me to chapter 9:17. He'll conclude by giving us nearly 15 straight verses about the guys who guarded the church and opened the doors in the morning for worship. Read chapter 9:28-32. Isn't that wonderful? Moses gets a verse or two, but so does a guy named Mattithiah. And what did he do? He showed up to make bread in the morning. Do you ever feel like Mattithiah? Maybe you feel that what you do – or what you are – doesn't matter, that you are not needed here, that you are not an important part of God's plan. Here the message of this important part of the Bible: you matter to God and you matter to the people of God.

We can easily start to feel small and unimportant and perhaps we start to wonder, “What difference does it make? We’re just a bunch of losers. We could never have an impact on our culture. Why don’t we just blend in and fly low and just do a little church and Jesus-stuff on the side? Let’s just try to hang on until Jesus comes.” That’s exactly what the people of Chronicles we’re facing. They came back from exile and it seemed like the glory days were over. They were dejected and defensive. The author of Chronicles is trying to tell us, “NO, NO, NO! You are God’s covenant people. You have a special calling – a calling that no one else can fulfill. The public schools, the Kiwanis club, sports teams, choirs, marching bands, civic organizations – they all have their place, but not one of them can take your place. You are the church of Jesus Christ. You are marked by God’s covenant love. You know it and the world desperately needs it. You have to be a light to all the earth, pointing people to God’s incredible love for the world. Look at your heritage, look at the people in your family album: the high and low, the rich and poor, the Jews and foreigners, the mighty and the humble, kings and rulers – they’re all in your family tree. You have royalty in your blood. You matter to God. You belong to this rich and sprawling family tree. Do you know how much you matter to God?”

And you – you plural, you Three Village Church – you have a job to do. No one else can do that job. How could you walk away from your job – the job that only you can do? For that discouraged band of Jewish believers who lived 2,400 years ago it was the same for us. Do you know if you’re a mother or a father, you have a job to do? Nobody else can replace you. God can raise up mentors and friends and others in the family of Christ to help and support, but only you can be you. Only you can speak up where God has planted you in the workplace or at school. You look around and wonder, “Why doesn’t someone do something about ____? Why doesn’t someone share the Gospel with these people? Why doesn’t someone make a difference at my high school or university or home or hospital or my sports team?” And God says, “That’s why you are planted there. You make the difference. Don’t wait for someone else to make the difference. I’ve called you. Feed my sheep.”

And this list includes you. You are needed here. You are called here. And if you’re name is removed, you leave a blank page open. A partial album is incomplete. A partial family is not a family. A partial fellowship falls short of God’s divine ideal.

God is still putting together his family picture album. How do I get my picture and my name and my whole life in there? John 1:12 says, “To all who received him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” You receive him. You put your trust in his name.