

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, July 7, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Genesis 5:1-10
Ephesians 3:14-21**

Sermon: Our Spiritual Geography: Roots (*a summer series*)

One of the “treasures” that I received from my parents’ house, when we were clearing it up a few years ago, was my mother’s great-aunt Cora’s second husband’s first wife’s fake Persian wool coat.

Yes, let me say that again: Great-great aunt Cora’s second husband’s first wife’s fake Persian wool coat.

Now, I don’t know if you have ever or will ever see me wearing this coat. It’s black, it’s Persian wool, it’s really not my style - and it’s buried in a trunk in our garage. I thought about un-earthing it to bring it with me today, but the stacks of boxes in the garage put that idea out of my head pretty quickly.

Now if you heard the genealogy of the coat, you might have realized that I’m not even related to this coat’s original owner. My great-great aunt Cora remarried in her later years, and somehow her second husband’s first wife’s coat came to my grandmother or mother – presumeably because great aunt Cora refused to wear it.

But I grew up hearing about it – not the coat so much as the story about how the coat came to be in our possession. As kids we loved to hear the words roll off my mother’s tongue. So the real reason I did not just send the coat off to Value Village, is it’s sentimental value. That value is not in the coat so much as it is in the story. The story of the Hilliard family from Alpena, Michigan, and their relationship with their kin up in Canada. We were the kind of poor relations who should be happy to receive a second hand, second husband’s first’s wife’s coat to keep them warm in the winter.

So, along with all the heavy brown furniture and china tea-sets that no longer sell very well in antique stores, I keep the coat because it says something about my roots. My roots are important to me. Those roots are symbolized by all the stuff that passed through a couple of generations, and have ended up with me. Eventually, I hope to enshrine their stories in sermons, not boxes, and hopefully empty the garage.

We are becoming a generation that is fascinated by its roots. Only now the stories are not being told through history books and family photo albums and memorabilia, but through DNA analysis and ancestry dot com. Every year, 14 million people sign up for DNA analysis with ancestry.com or twenty three and me. They want to know where or who they come from. And they aren’t satisfied just with the stories their parents might have told them, or the family tree someone put together. They want to know the concrete, scientific facts about their roots.

A number of years ago, we had Kofi Hope speak at our Black History Sunday service. He talked about his African roots, and I remember him saying that Africa was the cradle

or starting point of the whole human family. “We are all African,” he told us. “When we live out of prejudice against African descendants, we are also hurting ourselves.”

Today we are an almost rootless human generation. People move around the world for their employment, people are also displaced across the world by war and famine. We keep in touch with each other using every manner of technology, but sometimes we are still defined by the places our ancestors once lived, or places we have left generations ago, or carry a family name based on occupations we no longer occupy.

In the scripture stories of our faith, roots are really, really important. Sometimes biological family is important, but more often, faith is even more important. In the reading from Genesis this morning we heard just the very beginning of Noah’s genealogy – I stopped when the names became even harder to pronounce. You will note that Adam’s descendants are traced through Seth, not Cain – who was disinherited, so to speak, after he killed his brother Abel. So biological genealogy is one thing, but living in the faith is what gets your name in the begats.

Jesus’ genealogy also plays a significant role in the early chapters of his ministry. I didn’t make Mabel struggle through all those names in the New Testament begats. In the gospels, once again we see signs that Jesus’ important roots are not only the biological ones: the gospels of John and Mark by pass the begats completely. The gospel of Matthew plays up Joseph’s royal roots right back to King David, and emphasize the house of Bethlehem in which Jesus was raised. In the gospel of Luke, the author even grafts in a few characters from outside the Jewish gene pool – Rahab and Ruth, two women who were faithful beyond traditional family ties.

Did I mention that Rahab was a prostitute? And Ruth a Moabite? They were the political nemesis of any Israelite family living in the promised land. That either woman is mentioned is a surprising and unusual revelation, to find an outsider now worthy of being named in Holy Scripture.

What would it mean, if you went through all the work of tracing your family DNA, only to find you were related to Adolph Hitler, or Pol Pot or Idi Amin? Would that change how you see your life? Would it make you ashamed to talk about your roots? Or would it make you MORE determined to see that the future turned out better than the past?

The math behind genealogy is also intriguing and revealing, according to science writer Steve Olson.

The search for our roots is ultimately exponential – it keeps growing every generation you go back. I am one person, with two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, etc, etc. The stories and the histories keep expanding.

Supposedly, after 10 generations all lineage reaches “an inflection point”, where all our ancestors turn out to be most of the population living in a certain area of the world. Almost all European background individuals, for example, share at least one common ancestor in the last five centuries. And almost everyone in the world is related through what scientists call a “recent common ancestor”. “Recent” in terms of world history of course is about 5000 years, so don’t start planning your ginormous family reunion yet.

In the modern world, we tend to see family as linear, a great chain of being. The names on the family tree form a triangle – and the triangle forms a pyramid of power and proximity. Culturally, we have imposed this on the environment around us, like social hierarchies based on gender, skin colour, and language. Like the food chain linking hunters and carnivores, omnivores and herbivores. Like the church, with its leaders and its followers, its popes and bishops, its authorities and ordinations.

Due to the search for our roots, however, the linear model of that great chain of being has been replaced. We have discovered that the branches of our family trees are entangled. There is no greater web than the connectedness of all life in creation.

This comes as no surprise, of course, to many indigenous peoples who remember, from their own family stories and their oral history, that there was a very different worldview before colonization by European settlers.

In 1854, Chief Seathl (susquamish of the West coast islands) is said to have made this famous observation in his response to treaty negotiations with the American government: *This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.*

The great web is the woven world of the whole planet, and the people, and the God who dwells therein. In the story of the Tall Trees, I noticed the names of the three limbs: Jacob (in scripture his name was changed to Israel); Paul (the apostle who championed a universal gospel) and Elijah Ali (a very Islamic name). Three “Abrahamic” faiths, with one common trunk, close to the ground of our being.

In this world view, God is not a far-off Weaver of the web, not distant and self-contained. God is not absent from the world, only attending to us when prayers are strong or faithful enough. God is part of the web, entangled in our sticky messes, and sorting out the threads until it becomes interconnected and beautiful again.

Webs are fragile and breakable – somehow the broken parts still provide a home of sorts. However, a new web needs to be woven, almost every day if you ask the weaver. We can't go back and change our roots, but we can shape the future with our choices: In our homes, In our neighbourhoods, In our nation, (and that's what this sermon series is all about). May God bless our spiritual geography, wherever life takes us, may we go in peace.