



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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God's DNA

Matthew 5: 43-48

It has been quite popular over the last few years for folks to find out a little about themselves by sending off some DNA to companies like Ancestry.com. We may do this to find out something about our ancestors or to find out about where we come from. Which countries did our people come from, are we related to someone famous? We may also try to find out what illnesses we may be prone to through a study of our DNA. I am sure several of you have sent off to Ancestry to learn about yourself. Our DNA determines who we are. It shapes our features, our tendencies, even how we respond to stress and injury.

A few years ago, Sara wanted our family to participate in the Ancestry craze. She sent kits as Christmas presents to all her siblings and her mom, and it was a fun family thing. She also wanted me to participate. Now some of you know I was adopted as a baby. I knew a little about my birth mother, that she was from the highlands. She was a student nurse in Edinburgh. But I knew nothing about my birth father, he could have been from anywhere. Now you must understand I am very happy knowing that I am Scottish. Being Scottish has been my thing in the United States. I grew up there, I have the accent, I actually like haggis!

So, it crossed my mind as I sent this thing off to learn about my heritage that it may come back giving me news that I did not want to hear. What if my birth father had not been Scottish, what if he came from somewhere else? What if I am not as Scottish as I think. This was a concern. Would I even be able to preach at a Kirkin of the Tartans service and look you in the eye? I can promise you that if the result came back saying I was not as Scottish as I thought, I would never have spoken of it again. It would have been buried! My DNA mattered!

The Kirkin of the Tartans service celebrates where we have come from, the origins of the Presbyterian Church, which means the service is Scottish in nature. The DNA of the Presbyterian Church goes back to Europe, Ireland and predominantly Scotland. Much of how we do things including our form of government goes back to Scotland. Our reformed faith finds much of its origins in John Calvin and John Knox. They would have claimed that its origins were in the early New Testament church and the teaching of Jesus. Look at these tartans we have on display here. In Scotland, your tartan tells a story. The pattern of colors isn't just decoration—it declares who you belong to. Long before surnames were common, people could look at the cloth you wore and know your clan, your loyalty, your lineage. Your DNA was found in the colors you wore; they identified you, and that could be quite important. The tartans like DNA were an identifier and they were important.

In our Gospel passage this morning, I think Jesus is sharing the genetic code for the kingdom of God. Jesus gives us a strong identifier for a glimpse into the DNA of God in his teaching which ends this section of the Sermon on the Mount.

Leading up to this section, Jesus has had a number of sayings that begin with, "You have heard it said," where he usually is quoting the Old Testament and then he raises the bar on expectations for Christian living. He has said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' [e] 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' [h] 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."

These are hard teachings and it seems Jesus is deliberately employing hyperbole to grab attention.

In verse 43 Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor [l] and hate your enemy.' Most Bibles will have a footnote to reverence Leviticus chapter 19 as the section of scripture that Jesus is

quoting. In verse 18 we read, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." So, there is a mention of loving your neighbor, but nothing about hating your enemy. In fact, there is no command in scripture to hate your enemy. So, it seems Jesus is picking up on an oral teaching that had become popular or he was tapping into an attitude of hatred toward enemies that had become the normal and accepted in that day. The Israelites were frequently at war with neighboring nations, and some Old Testament texts describe actions that seem harsh by modern standards. For example, in Deuteronomy 7:2, God instructs Israel to destroy the Canaanite nations and show them no mercy. Such passages focused on the preservation of Israel's holiness and may have influenced a mindset that viewed enemies with contempt and hatred. If we read this passage in light of Jesus later teaching regarding the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10, we see that Jesus perhaps has already redefined neighbor in his mind. Those who may have been considered enemies are our neighbors. They are part of who we are called to love.

So, you have heard it said love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say, and here comes the bar being raised, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. Now these "But I say" statements that Jesus uses in the Sermon on the mount are viewed by some commentators as intended to make the hearer feel that it is impossible to follow Jesus' teaching on your own. That we are incapable to of satisfying the righteous demands of God, which then forces us to recognize our total dependance on God's saving act in Jesus.

There is nothing wrong with that conclusion, it is a good take away. However, the evidence seems to show that the early church did not consider the command to be impossible. Early Christian writers often spoke of the church loving and praying for their persecutors.

When Jesus speaks of love, he is not simply referring to feelings or emotions. I am sure it includes those things, but I think Jesus was referring to our actions. To love your enemy, whether that had been the Roman Soldier, or

personal persecutor of the time, was not to experience warm fuzzy feelings but to act in a positive way.

Love was something that you did. In the preceding verses, Jesus gives concrete suggestions, if someone wants your shirt, also give him your coat as well, if someone wants you to walk a mile with them, walk the second mile as well, if you are slapped on one cheek, turn the other to him also. Consider what that means to your situations, to how you deal with your enemies, national or personal. Use your imagination on how you find ways to love. Quite often we look at passages like this and think, oh yeah, I know who needs to read this, I know who needs to love their enemy. Perhaps we should instead ask, what do I need to do to love my enemy?

Our country is sorely divided right now, we are triggered by comments and events in ways that drive us further apart. We attack, we defend, we do not trust, we fear, we are angry, we point fingers, we take joy in what brings despair to others. And this week has been a week for triggering events and statements. Brooklyn preacher Rich Villodas says in his advent devotional, "We are told to believe that the government and the political world will be healed when our candidate gets elected or our preferred political party has control. Isaiah reminds us that the only one who can bear the weight of the world on his shoulders is Jesus. He will be the one to bring justice and fairness, he will be the one to heal our divisions, He will be the one to make all things new."

And we hear the words of this Jesus this morning. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. We have heard these words many times. Let's hear them again. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Perhaps it is time that our go to is not finger pointing and looking at how others can change, but instead self-reflection on how WE love our enemies. How do WE, not someone else, love those we disagree with. No, I hear you say, we must defend this, we must stand up to that. That's fine but as a follower of Jesus you are first called to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. That may be a national thing, and international thing, or it may be the person in your life that just.... makes it difficult.

Jesus raises the bar. Love them and pray for them. Let's begin with that and then see how we approach our differences. Does that mean you like what they do, does it mean you agree, does it mean you have warm fuzzies? Maybe not, but that is not the point here. Remember, love is what you do. It's easy to love those who are easy to love. Jesus tells us that. But the bar is raised. Let's work on how we love those who are not so easy.

*This impossible possible love is in the very DNA of God. Jesus is the full expression of who God is, Jesus is the DNA of God and when we follow Jesus, we grow closer as we journey to that DNA being ours. The family resemblance becomes more and more apparent. We become less concerned with how right we are, and more concerned with how much we resemble our Gracious God. Love is the primary strand in God's DNA, Jesus says the most important thing is to love God and to love people. He is just making sure that we understand that it includes those folks we find hard to love. Just a quick word in case that final sentence worries you, Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. The word perfect means **complete, mature, whole**. As we remember that love is the important thing, we become more like God, we become complete, we become whole.*

Now if you are still on tenterhooks regarding my Ancestry.com test, it came back 92% Scottish. I'm happy with that, but I am reminded this morning that the only DNA I really want you to know about is that which makes me love, even those who persecute me.

*As Paul wrote to the Romans,
While we were enemies, Christ loved us.
While we were sinners, He died for us.
And now He says, "Go and do likewise, it's in your DNA"
AMEN.*

Love for Enemies Matthew 5

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.