

*“Spitting Image”*

*Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15*

*Trinity Sunday, May 26, 2013*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

Let me begin by thanking the Bittners for having Rordan baptized today. Whether Rordan will grow up to be the “spitting image” of Josh remains to be seen, but the possibility is a way to think our about spiritual DNA in this message, “Spitting Image.”

We know what it means, of course. He, or she, looks/sounds/acts just like their parent. The image is usually visual and usually father/son or mother/daughter, though not always. No matter: sometimes our genealogy is unmistakable.

The etymology of this phrase is interesting. Some sources observe that saliva is a carrier of our genetic code and hence carries “spitting image.” Close Bible readers will remember that Jesus healed the man born blind in John 9 by mixing spit and mud and placing it over the man’s eyes. Other sources say “spitting image” is a corruption of “splitting image,” the notion that on procreation the division of cells makes a mirror image of the original. Still others say the phrase is “spit and image” or “spirit and image.”

But Heidi Stevens, writing in the December 22, 2010 edition of the Chicago Tribune, reports the findings of Dr. Laurence Horn, professor of linguistics at Yale, is that the actual phrase is “spitten image.” Dr. Horn says “spitten” is the dialectal past participle of “spit.” I could only find it in Webster’s Dictionary as a medieval English word, but who am I to lock horns with Dr. Horn? In any event, it morphed to “spittin” and finally “spitting.” All this expectorating gets a little gross and includes additional biological details not necessary or appropriate for the younger set. Suffice it to say that some of us do look, think and behave like those who given us life.

From a spiritual point of view, however, this emphasis on biology and biological family misses a far more important pedigree revealed in

today's scriptures. There are references to it throughout Jesus' ministry, to be sure; a pedigree that stood in contrast to a narrow notion of family and one's clan. Jesus' mighty words and works were rejected in his hometown because the folks said "*Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?*" *And they took offense at him.*" (Mark 6:3) Jesus broadened the definition of family when he declared "*For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*" And as he was being crucified and about to die (John 19:25b-27), he presented John, the beloved disciple, to his mother and said to her "*Behold thy son*" and to John, "*Behold thy mother.*"

This far more important pedigree is our spiritual genealogy. Am I saying biology is not important? God forbid it! We know that people of all ages are benefitted when genetic and biological history is known, especially in the area of disease. But for every "apple that does not fall far from the tree" there are children that stray despite the best human parenting; and children that rise above the worst human parenting.

So what then is our spiritual genealogy? It is three things:

First, we are a hair's breath away from God. The Psalmist starts from a place of wonder and awe: "*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*" (Psalm 8:3-4) The weather may not cooperate today, but look soon on a clear night at the starry sky. Recall all that we know about our solar system and universe, how vast it is and how much is unexplored. Feel how small you are.

Yet, says the writer says immediately, "*Yet you have made them (mortals) a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.*" Wow. WOW!

Maybe you came here today not feeling so godly. If not, this is incredibly good news. We can't shake our spiritual DNA. We are a little lower than God.

Second, we are given everything we need by God through Christ and the Holy Spirit (John 16:12-15). This is the “Upper Room” passage: Jesus’ conversation with his closest disciples in the Upper Room celebrating Passover the night before his death. In a sense, this is his deathbed speech. This single conversation comprises five full chapters, nearly ¼ of the 21 chapters in John’s Gospel. At the point of today’s reading he is near the end of what he needs to say to the disciples. He knows they cannot hear it all. Like the person who is getting bad news from the doctor, Jesus tells the disciples *“I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”* So what he does is reassure them.

One of the things we sometimes do in “Disciple” Bible study is to paraphrase scripture in our own words. Paraphrase is not a substitute for scripture, but paraphrasing scripture helps us apply it to our lives. So my paraphrase of today’s Gospel has Jesus saying: *“Friends, God never stops speaking to us. Even when I’m gone, God’s Holy Spirit is going to tell you the truth, and that truth is from God: about loving people and living right and serving our neighbors, no matter who they are. God has given me this message, I’ve given it to you; and now the Holy Spirit will take my message and keep giving it to you.”*

This trio—God, Christ and the Holy Spirit—is the basis of our doctrine of the Trinity. God is three, yet one. That doctrine is the basis of the Apostles’ Creed we said earlier today. So I need a volunteer [here we demonstrate the Trinity with a person who is “three” yet “one.”]

So we have everything we need.

Until we don’t. Because sometimes we don’t. We mess up. We are like the name of the law firm on the long-running PBS radio program “Car Talk:” “Dewey, Cheatem and Howe.” One of the things we studied in Confirmation, that makes us different from the animal kingdom, is our ability to make moral choices; our knowledge of “right” from “wrong;” and our conscience, that part of us that says *“Hey, hey, Brian”* when we know we’re on the wrong path. I leave you to fill in the details of that from your life’s saga as I can certainly do from mine.

Despite our wondrous pedigree as “little lower than God,” despite our being given the spirit of truth and divine guidance, we sin.

Which brings us to the third part our spiritual genealogy:

We are restored to God by God’s incessant love. This reading from Romans 5 launched the Reformation! It was these handful of verses at the beginning of the fifth chapter that convinced Martin Luther that it was God’s grace, and our faith (trust) in that grace, that justifies us. It is God’s love that fixes us and that—not the things we do—restores us to right relationship with God and our fellow humans. Our “spitten image” is restored because we belong to God, and nothing we can do can ever change that.

Someone might rightly ask, “How do I know that? How does it work?” I know it because I’ve experienced it, usually in the faces and lives of other people. The other evening I was privileged to be one of those people, attending a support group to which I belong and reminding the distressed person—who is very diligent in prayer but wondering “Why God am I in this situation?—that God was answering her prayer in part through the presence of the other members of the support group. They—we—became the “spitten image” of God for this young woman.

So can we for one another. Our blood lines have value, but it is in our spiritual genealogy that we find that we are reflections of the Most High God: a little less than God, given everything we need through God’s presence in the Trinity, and restored in our brokenness because God never gives up loving us. We can never shake our spiritual DNA. What a blessing!