

A Gigantic Genetic Lenten Family Reunion **(#2 in the “Only This and Nothing More?” Lenten series)**

I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.
(Psalm 51:5)

*Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin,
and so death spread to all because all have sinned.*
(Romans 5:12)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Second Sunday in Lent, **February 25, 2018**
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Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

Last Sunday I began my Lenten series with two instances in the Hebrew bible asking the question “*Mah enosh?*” (“*What is man?*”), a question encapsulating our human search for meaning. I pointed out how Psalm 8 asks that question in a context of adoration, expressing awe at humankind’s lofty place in creation. “*When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established, what is man that you are mindful of him? Yet you’ve made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor!*”

Job, in chapter 7, posed and answered the same question differently. Where the psalmist had the heavens in view, Job spoke with the dust of the earth caking his lips, the grave squarely in his sights. “*What is man, that you should exalt him, that you should set your heart on him?*” Thus far he sounds like the psalmist, but then, “*Why have you set me as Your target? I will lie down in the dust, and you will seek me diligently, but I will no longer be.*”

Job’s point is crystal clear. “*If I am your target, I’m going to be difficult to find! I lie in the dust, turning back to dust, becoming indistinguishable from the dust, one with dust. You will not find me, for I will BE the dust.*” This, of course, is our Ash Wednesday ritual, ashes smeared upon our foreheads with the words, “*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*”

Holding Psalm 8 and Job 7 in balance, we discover the paradox of both the littleness and the greatness of humankind, a paradox we ponder during Lent as we balance our mortality with the innate sense that we are More than dust returning to dust, that *Something More* is compounded within the human molecule.

The question we’re asking in this series, “*Only This and Nothing More?*” simply asks if our physical journey from cradle to grave is all there is to our being human? I revealed last week where I found the words with which I’ve titled this series, in the first stanza of Edgar Allan Poe’s, *The Raven*:

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore--*

*While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door--
Only this and nothing more."*

At the chancel to receive Ash Wednesday's black ashes, it is as if we are responding to a knock on our chamber door (these lodgings of flesh), the spoken ritual a messenger reminding us who we are. We are this, yes. Dust! But are we "*Only This and Nothing More?*"

Something there is within us which suggests otherwise. We sense that there is *Something More* to being human, a More which we express as having been created in the divine image, separating us from other orders of Being. All living things change, morphologically, which is to say the "chamber" they inhabit evolves and then devolves. Our flesh is no exception to the rule. Trees grow, flourish, and decay and, for them, they may well be "*Only this and Nothing More.*"

We humans, however, sense that we are not "*Only This and Nothing More.*" As Paul wrote of the Christian experience of death, "*Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day . . . for we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, what cannot be seen is eternal.*" If this is true it follows that we are not "*Only This and Nothing More.*" Paul seems to suggest that within us is a light of Knowing which recognizes this *More*. He calls this inner illumination, "*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*"

When our acolytes enter the sanctuary they are not merely escorting the light of Christ into the sanctuary as a symbol for us to admire. Acolytes standing in the foyer and waiting to lead the procession, when Ruth chimes the organ five times it is as a tapping, a rapping which will gather congregational attention to recognize the light as it enters the sanctuary. As they proceed, pew by pew, the light of God in our hearts is, as it were, being gathered into Christ's light.

Perhaps those five attention-gathering chimes should be heard as a tapping on the chamber door of our hearts to say, "*Whatever darkness there is in your heart, whatever hopelessness – look to this light! Let it mingle with the light in you, so that hope may burn bright.*"

Lent hold the promise that whatever we may have become, transformation is possible. Whatever we might have become today, we are not "*Only This and Nothing More!*" Knowing this makes the sight of hopelessness in others intolerable. To the extent that our instinct is to offer hope to the hopeless, I think it is because we recognize in hopelessness – in ourselves and in others -- a contradiction to what we were created to be.

That's why our highest and purest human instincts when we see hopelessness compel us to respond. Last month we met nine mission points receiving grants from our \$1 offering last month. Many of you give of yourselves in other ways to these missional organizations meeting a need in lives. I think, serving in this way, we become acolytes to in search of light, walking often into the "chambers" of their lives in which they may feel trapped. As acolytes, you are carrying more than food. You are carrying light and hope with an essential message to share, "*You are not Only This and Nothing More.*"

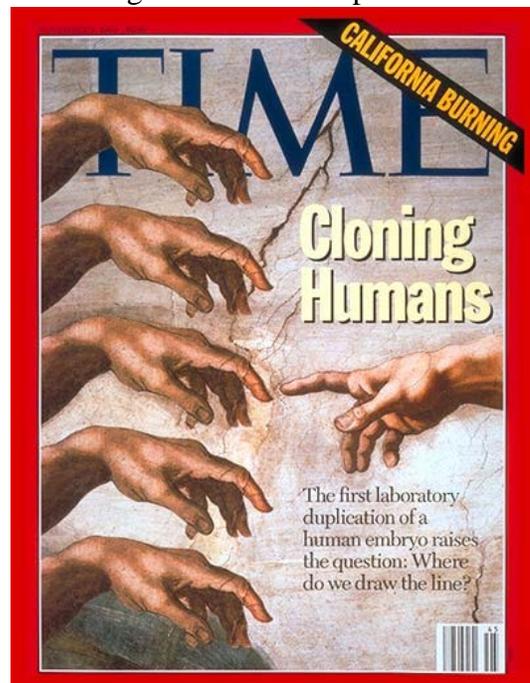
Why should we care? Because we are, at last, a family. Neighbors, as Jesus said in one of his most famous parables, the Good Samaritan. Separate we are, yes, in more ways that we could possibly enumerate. Yet, a family, still. Let's call it, a *Gigantic Genetic (Lenten) Family*.

If theologians have quarreled about the idea of divine determination through God's decree, our western culture is now enchanted by a different form of pre-determination, a fate for the human person compelled not by divine fiat but by genetic pre-programming. Scientists are busy analyzing the genetic brew in order to postulate theories on how our DNA determines human proneness to depression, diabetes, cancer, etc. Our best genetic sleuths are seeking to de-code the DNA.

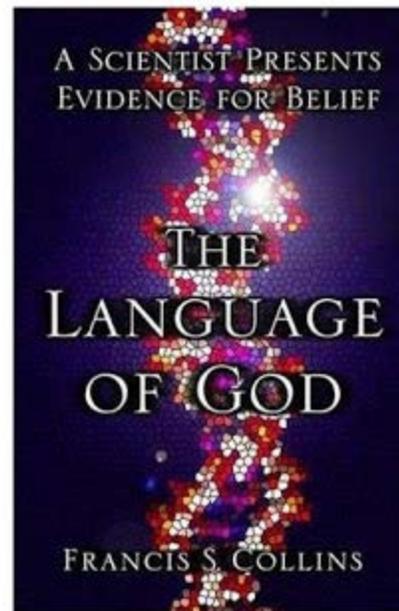
We must be careful, lest predetermination of the scientific sort forget that we are called to be *More* than the DNA fragments framing our bodies. I suppose predetermination through DNA could be used to excuse anything, defending our disposition to steal or lie or commit adultery or kill, or to gamble it all away. "*Science has shown that God made me like this. I am Only this and Nothing More.*" Okay, but is it not part of being created in the image of God that we are invited to transcend our DNA, to experience a spiritual dimension beyond the most constituent elements of the flesh?

A year after Dolly the Sheep became a cloning celebrity, the November 8, 1993 issue of TIME displayed a most intriguing cover, a fascinating manipulation of one of Michelangelo's greatest masterpieces -- the Sistine Chapel's *The Creation of Adam*. Michelangelo's work shows the divine hand reaching forth to another, fingertips not quite touching. The hands are precise duplicates in form, but the human hand is slack and dispirited, limp and lifeless. Absent is the hint of energy, the quickened muscular tone with which the divine hand stretches to make contact so as delicately, yet powerfully, to impart life.

What made TIME's reproduction so unique? Michelangelo showed only one human hand, representing Adam. To introduce its article on cloning, TIME entered the Xerox dimension, stacking five hands on the human side of the creative equation, all identical in form -- a new twist, to be sure, on God's command to "*be fruitful and multiply.*"



During the late 80s and early 90s I was in Ann Arbor studying Hebrew and Semitic languages, breaking open what seemed like codes in ancient documents like the Dead Sea Scrolls or cuneiform texts from Babylon. In the church I was attending was a young scientist who was busy breaking a very different sort of code, the genetic code to cystic fibrosis. Francis Collins' breakthrough discovery propelled him instantly into fame, appointed by the president as the Head of the Human Genome Project, a mapping of the human genome completed before the allotted timetable. Today, Francis is the Director of the National Institutes of Health. Francis' testimony of faith, as one of the world's most heralded genetic scientists, landed him on the cover of TIME magazine, but my recollection of Francis is different. I remember him in my Sunday School Class and even playing the guitar on Sunday evenings, leading worship at Packard Road Baptist Church. His book, *The Language of God*, sports the double-helix of the DNA on the cover – a message of the truth of both science and faith.



In pre-scientific days the sense that we humans are pre-programmed was conceived as divine decree. King David, living millennia before scientific awareness of our genetic blueprint, was convinced that something was pre-programmed into him. *“I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.”*

Let's paraphrase David's words in modern language. *“I was born guilty. I'm pre-programmed to do what I do. Genetically. Out of one comes five. Then fifty. Then 500. But no matter how many times we replicate, we're all the same. At least with regard to our sin nature, we're all the same – rich/poor, black/white, city/farm, white collar/blue collar, Democrat/Republican – we're all different yet, insofar as the sin nature is concerned, it's as if we were Xerox copies of each other, stacked and layered in our descent from Adam and Eve, our proto-parental genetic stuff. We may not have all sinned alike, but we have all alike sinned. The genetic codes scrambled in my conception pre-disposed me to sin. It's in the genes.”*

Let's take a playful look at your gene pool. I hope you brought your calculator, because we're going to count much higher than five, adding up how many ancestors you've had in the last 700 or so years – back to 1300. Here's the simple mathematical formula. Unless you're a clone, everyone here had two biological parents involved in your reproduction. Since each of those two parents also had two parents, you have four biological grandparents. Since each of those four had two parents, you see that the number of ancestors doubles with each generation. So, everyone here has eight biological great-grandparents, sixteen biological great-great grandparents, 32 biological great-great-great grandparents, and so on as the branches on your family tree spread out.

Now, carry that formula back 21 generations (a generation every 33 years, approximately 3 generations per century, so that 21 generations equals 700 years). Now you would say the word

“great” 19 times followed by the word, “grandparents.” You will have, in that generation, (are you ready?) 2,097,152 people you could call your grandparents.

Welcome to your Gigantic Genetic Lenten Family Reunion. What a wonderful genetic stew you are! You’ve got millions of people dancing in your DNA, cavorting with your chromosomes. Out of two million plus genetic re-combinations in the last 700 or so years, lurking in your gene pool are surely some Einsteins and asinines, poets and poof-heads, dreamers and deadbeats, lovers and loners, porkers and petites. Surely, in such a vast ocean of genetic soup there have been klutzes and knights, kooks and kings, killers and knuckleheads and kleptomaniacs. Welcome these millions to a Lenten reunion of your gene pool.

We are born a genetic conglomerate of millions. Interesting, though, how the Apostle Paul ignores the millions to focus instead on a single primal ancestor, Adam. “*Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned*” (Romans 5:12).

Lent calls us to recognize our sameness at least in this, that we are dust returning to dust. We look, though, not at the millions but at the One hand -- the Creator who is the Ground of our Being and the Hope of our Becoming.

May your Lent be filled with many moments reminding you that you are NOT “*Only This and Nothing More.*”