

A Bigger Table

When it comes to discovering the origin of the twelve tribes of Israel, we have a challenge. On the one hand, we have the story we read in Genesis today, of Jacob's marriage to two sisters, Leah and Rachel, and the story that comes in the next chapter of the baby wars between the two sisters to see who could provide the most children for their husband. Let's leave aside for the moment the many problems that story has for modern morality, issues about polygamy and using women to pay a debt and seal a deal rather than treating them as people, and later on about using your maid as a concubine to produce more children for your husband with you getting all the credit. Granted, that's a lot to leave aside, but let's do that just for the moment. The biblical story tells us that the origin of the twelve tribes of Israel is that they were descended from the twelve sons of Jacob.

The challenge we face is that archeological discoveries made over the last few decades in the Holy Land seem to call this into question. Instead of all being part of one biological family, the archaeology seems to show that there were twelve separate tribes that grew up in different areas of the Holy Land, each with its own background. Some were shepherds, some were farmers, some were traders. Most tended to be small and dark, others were bigger and red-headed. Over time, these tribes made alliances with each other and intermarried. Eventually, for a short period of time, they were all one nation, ruled by a single king. The one thing that held these twelve different tribes together was their faith. They all worshiped the one God, Yahweh.

So how do we put these two stories together? Imagine this. We're a good deal later in the history of Israel than we've been hearing about in the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the time of Israel's greatest strength and power, late in the reign of King David or in the time of King Solomon. The people are well settled in the land and are beginning to think about building a temple to the one God they all worship. They are divided into twelve tribes. Each tribe

has its own geographic region, its own family connections and its own reputation. Just the same way as today Texans are known as big, brash cowboys and Californians have the reputation of being “cool, man”, liberal and laid back, so each tribe of Israel had its own reputation. Reuben was strong but unstable. Judah was strong and majestic like a lion. Zebulun by the sea was full of sailors. And all those tribes were looking after their own interests, quarreling with each other, pushing to see who was first, who was most important. What would hold them together?

One storyteller thought about the stories they told of their history, of the God who saved them and made covenant with them. That was what they had in common. That was what made them, in spite of their differences, one family. One family of faith. So he using bits and pieces of stories he had always been told, he wrote down a story that showed them just that way – as all part of one family, with divisions and differences from the very beginning, but descended from a common ancestor, bound together in one family that was chosen and called by God. The historical facts of the story didn't matter as much as the deeper truth it told.

Today we are celebrating All Saints Day, that great community of people of faith that stretches all the way back through time. When you look at who has been part of that community, it's not one straight line that leads us back to Jesus and the twelve disciples. It's a complex, tangled web of relationships of people from all kinds of backgrounds, from every nation on the earth as people have come to hear the gospel and know the love and faithfulness of God in many different situations. From the very beginning the church has been a mixed bag. The first recorded conflict in the church after Pentecost was between converts who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic and those who spoke Greek – believers who shared a common faith, but spoke different languages. Paul talks about the divisions within the Galatian church – divisions between slaves and free people, between men and women, between those who had been Gentiles and

those who had been Jews. Those differences among Christians are even greater today, with two thousand years of history behind us. There are Catholics and Orthodox, and all kinds of Protestants including people like us Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Baptists. Then there are the free-church folks like the Pentecostals in our neighborhood and around the world. We worship in different styles, sing different songs, speak different languages and wear different clothes to church.

And yet....because of our shared faith in and allegiance to Jesus Christ, we are not many different faiths, many different families. We are one family with many different branches. There is one church, for as Ephesians says, there is One Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. Our Book of Order says, "To be one with Christ is to be joined with all those whom Christ has called into relationship with him." That relationship with Jesus surpasses any difference or division we might perceive. We all are one in Christ.

Later today, we're going to lead worship at Harlee Manor. The service I lead is billed as "Protestant worship", but we always get one or two Catholics. "I'm Catholic", they say to me almost apologetically, as if they're afraid they won't be allowed to stay. "We share the same Jesus", I say, and for them and for me, that is enough.

From the days of Jacob and Rachel and Leah until now, God seems to be at work building a bigger family. Those family connections are real, even if they aren't connections made by biology. Rooted and grounded in our shared faith, our faith connections reach across boundaries of all kinds and make us one family.

Families, including the family of God, are not perfect. We squabble with one another, we hurt one another, sometimes we turn our backs on one another and stop speaking for a while. But the things that bind us together are stronger than the forces that push us apart. God's love and grace as it's known to us

through Jesus, a commitment to the way Jesus teaches us, and our shared commitment to one another in this body hold us together in spite of all the things that separate us, including time and death itself. That is what our faith family story tells us as it stretches across the generations.

In a world where the order of the day is to tear down and tear apart, the communion of saints has another story to tell, of a unity that is greater and stronger that binds us together in love.