

American Desi and Abraham's Descendants

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Our theme this month in our church is “ancestry.” My message to you today is that while we may struggle to feel connected to our parents or family, that there *is* a deeper connection that can sustain us.

I'd like to tell you about a movie released in 2001, set in New Jersey, called *American Desi* (*pronounce dayshee*). The word *Desi* is a word that people from India use to refer to themselves. In the opening scene, a young man is leaving home to move to college. His mother blesses him by putting a red dot on his forehead, and circling his face with incense. His father reminds him to kneel so that both parents can touch him on the head to receive their blessing. When he gets out to the car to begin the drive to college with his friend, he blasts the radio, and hoots and hollers about how much he can not wait to get *away* from his family and his Indian heritage.

When they arrive at the campus and are unloading the car, as he meets people, he tells them his name is Kris. When he arrives at the door to his dorm room, he is dismayed to see his full name posted on the door: Krishna. He rips off the last three letters, as another way to declare his name is *only Kris*. He is then further dismayed to see the other three names on the door of the dorm room: all Indian names.

The first night, in an attempt to get away from his roommates, he goes to a party. He meets a girl, flirts, and confides his frustration that he got assigned to a bunch of Indian roommates. She responds by speaking in Hindi --- an Indian language --- and walks away.

So, I think you can see the comedy, and the pain, in his dilemma. In order to get the girl, he has to embrace his ancestry.

As the story unfolds over the semester, his roommates forgive his initial cold shoulder, and begin to teach him about Indian cooking, dancing, and movies, all of which he had stubbornly refused to learn from his family when he was growing up.

And yet, the movie doesn't leave us with a simplistic notion of Indian heritage.

We also see *nuances*---the roommates are all very different from each other:

In their *religious* beliefs, one is Muslim, one is Hindu, one is Rastafarian, and one couldn't care less.

In their *family values*, one is determined to only marry a girl from India picked by his parents, one is determined to avoid an arranged marriage, and one doesn't seem interested in dating.

In their *vocational* desires, one wants to get a job which will please his parents, one wants a lucrative job, and one wants to pursue his artistic passion, whether it leads to a job or not.

At one point in the movie, our main character is insulted by one of his rivals, who was born in India. What is the ultimate insult? He calls him an ABCD.

ABCD.

It stands for American-Born Confused Desi.

Confused.

Rejecting his ancestry.

My friends, How many stories, movies, folktales, legends, myths have to do with a character who is rejecting their ancestry. And how often, by the end of the story, do they come to terms with their ancestry and make sense of it?

And isn't it true: on some spiritual level, we are tied to a deep Spirit, which we sometimes reject or resist, and then, as we mature spiritually, we come to terms with it.

Although in a folktale or movie, this storyline might happen once, with plot twists and a final outcome, over the course of our lives, we need to re-live again and again coming to terms with our ancestry, whether it be our birth, our culture, or our spiritual heritage.

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In learning my own ancestry, I am grateful to my 7th grade history teacher, who assigned us a project to learn history by asking questions of our relatives. At that point I learned that my some of my ancestors were Protestants called French Huguenots whose rights were denied in France because of their religion. They left, and dispersed to various other countries, and now most Huguenots are assimilated into other cultures, scattered from their homeland. Another piece of

my mixed heritage are the Scottish Protestants who were relocated by the King of England in the 1600's to live in Ireland. Because they were not welcomed there by the Catholics, they left and came to the US, and were known as Irish. But when an influx of Irish Catholics came the following century, this group renamed themselves as Scotch-Irish to make a distinction. This reminds me of the scene from the movie that I described earlier, in which a character insulted another character by calling him confused about his ancestry. As far as I can tell, this kind of confusion has been going on throughout human history in many different places during many migrations.

Confusion about our identity can be a problem if it contributes to confusion when we face difficult decisions. Sometimes, without a sense of meaning or identity, we are at risk of making decisions based on temporary pleasures or the nearest, quickest solution, even though these don't actually nourish us in the long run.

Having a sense of identity is important, because it can give us grounding and values.

Our ancestors can represent a wisdom that comes from life experience, so that we don't have to repeat their mistakes.

Perhaps this is why many world religions teach about ancestry.

In the Hebrew texts we find many lists of family trees.

Here is an example: I quote here from the book of Chronicles: And there will be a quiz at the end. 😊

Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. ²⁹ The sons of Ishmael became the heads of twelve tribes: Nebaioth (from the name of Ishmael's oldest son), Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, ³⁰ Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, ³¹ Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah.

³² Abraham had a concubine named Keturah, who bore him six sons: Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan had two sons: Sheba and Dedan. ³³ Midian had five sons: Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. (*citation: 1 Chronicles 1:28-33*)

I think you get the point. A long list of relatives. The list keeps going for many pages.

Now, as you heard this, did you notice the names of any women? The people who give birth? Only one of the four mothers was named.

At this point in this sermon, I *could* undertake a feminist critique, and discuss how the women have been omitted from this record of bloodline. I think it is *remarkable* that the exception is the concubine, and we could spend some time pondering whether that is empowering to list her, along with her name, even!

But, I will stick to my main point, which is that this list is intended to give a tether, a tie, a rooting, a grounding.

It is a way of saying, “don’t forget who you are.”

For this text is part of a story of the Hebrew people being uprooted and sent away into slavery. The list of ancestors serves as a way of saying “Even though you are far away from the land where you belong, know that you are a person with history.” My friends, isn’t it true: If you were a parent giving birth with no one around to be a grandmother, grandfather, auntie, uncle, or cousin to your child, this long list might give you solace.

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So, the examples I’ve given you so far in this sermon include slaves taken to a foreign land, religious refugees, and young men going off to college. They are separating from their families. They are exploring new identities. They are discovering the limits of these identities, and what will work, and won’t. Psychologists say that each of us has to do this separation, this individuation--whether we do that by going to the other side of the world, going to another town, or to a different part of the house we grew up in.

If we only had to do this *once* in our lives, that would be simple, yes?

But, we often face changes that challenge our identities at many stages of life: divorce, job loss, gender change, illness, discovering family secrets, facing new kinds oppression, immigration, war, and so many more. These can shake us to our core, so that we ask

“Who am I?”

“Am I adrift?”

“Am I utterly alone?”

“Am I connected to anything at all?”

Whenever we have to rebuild a new identity, or mend an old one, **one** way to do that would be to hold on to the pain, shut down, with new iron-clad protective siding.

Or **another** way, having had our hearts broken, is to let them be broken open to new love, with tenderness that is a new blossoming.

Perhaps this is why so many world religions seek to remind us, to comfort us, to reassure us: no, you are not alone.

Why did the Hebrew people need reminding about who they were connected to? Was it because the parents were so busy with other things that they forgot to tell their kids their family tree? Or was it because these ancient people, just like us, got busy with pursuing external things and forget what is truly sustaining?

And what about us, you, me, the people here at TJMC? What connects us to our ancestry? Well, I'd like to tell you what a wise group of people did in 1994. They looked at the fact that this church did not have a graveyard, or any place to put ashes, or sit and remember our deceased loved ones. So, they got organized. Yay for visionary people who work hard with dollars and dirt to make something that helps so many people today. Here is what they did:

The committee believed that this congregation needed a place which would include our members who have gone before us. As they discussed many options, they tried to include symbols which “felt” like a place to be buried and a place we could remember our own family. They discovered that we could not legally have a graveyard here. But we could qualify as a place for cremated ashes, and so they created the Remembrance Garden, also called our Memorial Garden. It is right outside that wall of windows, and you can also walk to it from the social hall. After considering how various faith traditions handle the need to remember deceased persons, the committee came up with four ways for us to do that here.

One is small square of space in the dirt for ashes to be placed, with the reasoning that a family can return to that particular spot.

Second, A stone marker on the Garden wall, with the reasoning that stone helps make the memory permanent.

Third, wooden plaques indoors, grouped by families, with the reasoning from the Jewish tradition that prayers for loved ones who have died in our congregation are said by the family during the month the person died. This also brings those who have gone before us a place within our church walls.

Finally, we keep a Memorial Book in the cabinet in the Foyer outside the Sanctuary. Loved ones submit a page of remembrances and photos of their beloved. The reasoning is that if you were a descendant researching your ancestor and came upon these remembrances it would be a treasure to discover something more than an obituary. It also gives us stories about our church members who have died.

The garden also has a stone that simply says, “for those lost at the dawn of life.” The Garden is available to members, their families and friends of the church. I commend to you to go and spend some time there.

We are coming up to the holiday time of year, a time when you might be reminded of who you were with in past holidays, and feeling ache at their absence. Whether or not your loved ones have their name on the wall of the memorial garden here, it is still a place for you to go and be with your memories, to honor them, to remember the gifts and blessings given you by your ancestors.

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When my mother died, I called one of her neighbors who is a minister, and asked him to come be with us in those first moments after the change. He wisely did not say too much, but right before he left, he looked me in the eye and since he knew me, he said: “Our parents here on earth will not always be with us, but we have an everlasting parent in God.” That was good for me to hear him say. I already had figured that out for myself in various ways as an adult, in addition to hearing it with my childhood ears. And for you listening today, you may experience comfort in that same knowledge, or in another understanding.

If you are Pagan, you may feel an everlasting grounding in Mother Earth, no matter what your earthly ancestors do.

Perhaps you have stood on the edge of the ocean, looking at the waves, the sand, pondering what all that water connects to, where all that sand came from. Scientists have told us that the saltiness of the ocean matches the salt in our blood. Geologists have told us that the sand is made up of rock which was once dirt and trees and other creatures, just like us.

Or, perhaps you have stood, one night looking at the stars for a long while. Long enough to ponder where those stars come from and where they are going. Were they born? Are they going to die? Astronomers have told us that the matter that makes up stars is the same matter that makes up our bones. So, really, we are connected to ancestors beyond naming.

But, does this give us comfort? Does this offer us love? Here, my friends, I think we have a choice. We can choose to believe in Love and Good and Compassion. Because they do exist in this world. And, since all things are connected, we are connected to them. No matter what bumps or bruises or traumas the world has sent your way, no matter how long your healing takes, there are moments you can choose your ancestry in Love.

Love.

Love is what the mother was trying to give her son when he left for college, in the story that I told you at the beginning. She put the red dot on his forehead. He was not ready to accept it at that time. Later, he developed an understanding so that he could.

And just in case you were wondering, what happened at the end of that movie?

He finally got humble. He learned his heritage. And he got the girl.

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