

Does our pedigree matter? (Philippians 3:4b-14)

Paul is not ashamed of most parts of his background.

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These days, it seems that just about everybody is trying to discover more about their ancestry. There are even popular television programs where people's ancestry is explored, often leading to surprising results. In a way, this is not new. Through the ages people have developed family trees, often trying to show that they have great ancestors.

The noble houses would claim that they could trace their ancestry back to one notable person or another. Lesser folk would also claim that their ancestors were among the founders of a nation, the leaders of a great event, the makers of earth-shaking discoveries, and so on. Given human inclinations to racism, many also used these family trees to prove "purity of blood."

Listening to such claims, it would seem that thieves, murderers, exploiters, and other such people never left any children.

Today, thanks to DNA testing, such claims become increasingly difficult. Less-than-admirable ancestors can no longer be swept under the rug. Any supposed "purity of blood" becomes more and more doubtful. But still we would like to be able to boast of our pedigree, and many do.

Our second reading opens with quite a pedigree. Paul seems to be boasting that he is as good a Jew as any, and perhaps even better. Not only was he circumcised on

the eighth day as prescribed by the law; not only was he named after the only king of his tribe of Benjamin; not only was he as observant as any Pharisee; but he went as far as persecuting the church, which he once saw as a threat to true Judaism.

Upon reading this list of motives for pride, one is reminded of what we often hear in many of our churches: *Both my father and my grandfather were pastors. I am a founding member of the church. I have been supporting the church and tithing for over 15 years.* And so on.

Paul is not ashamed of most of his pedigree. He obviously has corrected his overzealous attitude in pursuing the church. But there remain positive things to say about his having been circumcised as the law required, about being able to trace his heritage through his ancestors, and about being zealous in his obedience to the law. He is not apologizing for these things, but rather accepting them and then placing them in their proper place.

In short, he says that when compared with Christ, all of these things count for nothing. Furthermore, if we take his words literally, Paul would even maintain that in the ledger of his life these things are debits rather than credits. He says this because he acknowledges that trusting in himself and in what he has done becomes a loss when it stands in the way of claiming a righteousness that is a gift of God.

These are scary words. They imply that whatever reason I might have for boasting as a good Christian may well become an obstacle in the life of faith. When it comes to where we place our trust, it is very easy to substitute our accomplishments and our good deeds for the humble acceptance of God's grace and righteousness. It is a good thing for someone to be among the founders of a particular local church, or to come from a long line of active and faithful Christians. It is a good and necessary thing for Christians to do works of mercy on behalf of others.

But when we boast about such things as if they were the reason for our salvation and the foundation of our identity, it is time to hear once again Paul's words: in the light of Christ, all of this is to be regarded as loss and rubbish.

This is difficult, and Paul even hints that one has to be somewhat out of one's mind to see things in such a way. Ultimately, it is a question of what pedigree, what inheritance, we claim. The familiar phrase "be born again" is not just about having a beautiful experience with Jesus. It is about claiming a new parentage. This is why traditionally in baptism we do not use the person's last name, but only their given

name. All of us who are baptized share the same parentage, and therefore the same last name: “Christian.”

As Paul says earlier in this epistle, it is a matter of being out of our mind—because now there must be in us the mind that was in Jesus Christ, who being in the form of God took the form of a slave. That is our true pedigree, and the only one to boast about. The rest may be good or not, but it is as dross when compared to this.