

# *Credo*

## DNA FINGERPRINTING AND THE OFFERTORY PRAYER: A SERMON

*by Kim L. Beckmann*

*Abstract.* This Christian sermon uses a DNA lab experience as a basis for theological reflection on ourselves and our offering. Who are we to God? What determines the self that we offer? Can the alphabet of DNA shed light for us on the Word of God in our lives? This first attempt to introduce the language and laboratory environment of genetic testing (represented by DNA fingerprinting) within a parish preaching context juxtaposes liturgical, scientific, and biblical language and settings for fresh insights.

*Keywords:* DNA; DNA fingerprinting; eucharist; faith; grace; laboratory; offertory; sacrifice; sermon; Word of God

---

Today we will put our whole selves into the celebration that recalls Martin Luther's Reformation of the sixteenth century. We will get up out of our seats and join a line that comes toward the altar where God offers God's self for us. We're used to moving in that kind of procession when we come up for communion. But this might feel a little different, because today we are asked to bring up our annual pledges of money and talent for the church and lay them at the altar.

As usual, we will join in the offertory prayer as our gifts are brought forward with the bread and wine: "Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us: our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

The Reverend Dr. Kim L. Beckmann is pastor at Bethany Lutheran Church, Amasa, Michigan, and Trinity Lutheran Church, Box 636, Stambaugh, Michigan 49964. This sermon was preached on Reformation Sunday, 1998, and presented on 3 December 1998 for a Genetics, Faith, and Ministry class at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago on the topic "Genetic Medicine: Challenge to the Parish Preacher."

[*Zygon*, vol. 34, no. 3 (September 1999).]

© 1999 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

But what we have to offer today isn't tucked safely inside an envelope that we place in an offering plate, anonymous and hidden among all the others and eventually lifted up before God by someone else. Today we've sat down at our kitchen tables, brushed the toast crumbs away, sighed at the oily spot the drop of butter left on our worksheets. We've taken a deep breath, counted benefits, faced costs, and looked for ourselves and our unique gifts in this picture of our church's needs and opportunities for mission. We've put what we've been given and what we hope to offer on the lines. Maybe we've started to glimpse our whole lives as moving in offering.

So we may find ourselves more sober than joyful, strangely nervous, somewhat exposed, possibly pushed, as gripping those plans for giving and our Sunday offerings in our hot little hands we join in the offertory procession and lay them before the table of God's grace for ourselves.

If you think this offering procession makes you feel self-conscious, I wish you could have been with me a couple of weeks ago in a DNA lab at the University of Chicago. I was there on a field trip with a seminary class studying genetics, faith, and ministry, thinking it would be absolutely so cool to have a chance to see my own DNA.

I'm not sure when I realized that what I was feeling wasn't excited but nervous. Maybe it was when the moment of truth came and I had to sit across the lab from a group of people who barely knew me and swish saline wash vigorously through my mouth to harvest cheek cells for the DNA sample. I knew that we all do this, but usually it happens with a little more privacy. Out of decency, I tried to avert my eyes from my labmates across the way. I hoped they'd do the same for me, especially while I spit the results into the little cup and poured them into my test tube. All that I had chewed and left unchewed at lunch went into the cup along with my little cheek cells. "Not to worry," said our lab leaders cheerfully, "it's just a little gross." I guess they'd seen it before. I don't usually show it, though, or parade around with it for that matter.

Because that's when we started with the processions. The thing of it is, as we went around the lab to work with these cells, we had to carry our own test tubes full of stuff. You couldn't just give it to your neighbor and have them carry it to the centrifuge for you. You had to get up off your lab chair and bring it yourself.

Of course, that gave me the opportunity to compare what I had in my test tube with what everyone else had in their test tube. Mine had what looked to me like dirty lentil bits, while my neighbor's was a beautiful strawberry pink. I also had decidedly less. Probably too timid with the mouthwash for fear of looking stupid. Others had nice big gobs of cells in their test tubes, I couldn't help but notice.

"So maybe they have 5 billion cells and you just have 5 million," the ever-reassuring lab techs laughed over my worry that I didn't have enough.

The sample, in fact, was going to come from DNA that never even gets expressed. It doesn't take a leadership role, doesn't take charge or organize in the body; it holds a place—maybe like a rest in music, a classmate volunteered, or maybe, offered one of the lab techs, it just works quietly to keep the molecule stable. “You have way more than you need in there—trust me,” he said as I came forward with my offering.

So I held my test tube in my sweaty hand, joined the procession, and offered it up. That's when it hit me. “Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us . . . ourselves.” My eyes opened wide, and I suddenly could see us on this Sunday getting up out of our pews, being asked by the stewardship committee to bring up our offerings and our plan for giving because, it's, well, our *selves* we are offering. In the lab everyone has to work with their own cells partly to avoid contaminating the samples and partly because some people just don't feel comfortable working with someone else's cells. The procession made me understand that there's a certain reverence for the stuff of each one's own particular life that is really only ours to give, only ours to carry around and work with and offer. No one else can do it for us.

It was weird. I carry around my own DNA all the time, but I'm not used to carrying who I am, all my potential, outside of myself. I was not ready, in the middle of a hard cool science lab, to experience the holy, to come closer to God.

What I had in my hands suddenly awed me. I was going to see in these cells and molecules a glimpse of what I'd first been given by my parents: the plan for my hair color, my eyes, my height, my intelligence, or maybe developing Alzheimer's, or a tendency to high cholesterol that could kill me. Now, I knew that this segment of my DNA, anyway, couldn't actually tell me something about myself I might not want (or want my insurance company) to know. If I were in trouble with the law, though, this same fingerprint pattern in the picture of my DNA that shows me where what I've been gifted with makes me uniquely me, could also convict me of my sin or set me free.

But what if this picture of my DNA, not what I see when I look in the mirror but this pattern of bright light and shadow, is who I am to God? What if this is what God saw when God was creating my inmost parts, while I was being made in secret but not hidden from God's sight? What if this is God's language, God's word, what is written not only on our hearts but on every heart cell, every cell of my body, every fiber of my being? Could this be God's naming of me, signs of God's gracious love for me, as I am? Beautiful in God's sight and even flawed but known exactly for who I am? Is this something I should be seeing? Is this knowing something that should even be between me and God?

I was feeling a little woozy and was glad to get back to my seat. My offering, my self—or at least my DNA—was now in the heating block,

and I could relax. My eye fell on the next question in the lab protocol: "What is happening to the cells during this step?" Well, that was easy! A chemical reaction is taking place. Heat plus my DNA molecules equals . . . whoops. Yeah, I know what's happening! I'm coming undone. I'm unraveling. The strands of my DNA so carefully twisted together are separating, and I know that it's so things can come together again in a new way. It will still be me, my DNA, but it will be re-formed. It will come together for this special purpose that will help me see myself and the people in the experiment with me, and even God, in a new way.

This is a hard offering to make, to offer ourselves up for re-formation. How hard, after all, have we struggled to hold it all together, to keep from coming undone? How much energy it takes, until we could cry or scream, and now, having spent a lifetime putting it together we are being pried apart, opened up, dissolved? No wonder we're nervous today; it's a scary and awesome and maybe even a holy thing we're doing in offering ourselves, because in doing so we are opening ourselves up to the one who knows us best. We've offered ourselves again and again, in the Word, in the Bath, in the Meal, to be constantly re-formed. But it's frightening to come to the altar with our potential in hand today and pray for the Holy Spirit, the holy fire, to come down and start a chemical reaction here that may very well undo us. This is scary for us in our personal lives as we struggle to deepen our discipleship, as we consider our offering and open ourselves in bringing forward our plan for giving today. This is scary for us as a whole congregation discerning God's mission, scary as we ponder what it means for us to be a reforming church.

I wonder if this is how it was for Martin Luther when he walked up to the door of Castle Church, holding in his hands ninety-five proposals for reform, praying his offering would mean new life for the church. Did he know that his plan for giving, combined with the fire of the Holy Spirit, would start a process that would change his life and the church forever? I wonder if this is how scary it was for Jesus, who offered himself up for us on the cross, praying that God could make of this self-giving a new way of life and hope for the world, so that in the light of his resurrection we might come to see ourselves, those around us, God's grace, and even the offering of our whole lives in a new way.

Because finally, our DNA and the genes that make it up aren't our whole selves. We aren't any less than what we've first been given, but we are more than our genes. We are also shaped by our interactions with the world, and we shape the world and those around us by our responses. As children of God, we are shaped and our selves constantly re-formed by our interactions with the Word, with the Spirit of Jesus and the signs of God's gracious love Jesus offers for us in his body and blood that—in, with, and under the bread and wine—moves through our bloodstreams, becoming part of who we are, what we look like.

On this re-formation day, Jesus assures us that having Abraham's or anyone else's genes isn't by itself going to give us the freedom to lead whole lives, isn't going to make us free to offer our whole selves and all the resources we've been given for God's good purpose in our work in the world and the spreading of this good news of God's love.

Only abiding in, living in, taking in, and walking alongside Jesus will free us from the limits that our fear, our sins, our rigid put-togetherness, worries we don't have enough, and what we perceive as our inherited assets and liabilities impose on the gift and offering we would like to make of ourselves today. Maybe the procession we make with our offerings today isn't so much different from communion after all, as we come to the table of grace, praying to be opened up, re-formed by the gift of the Holy Spirit and made into the body of Christ.

Back at the lab we made one last procession, with stuff added to our test tubes that would put our separated DNA back together in a new way to help us see what we've first been given, to see who we are more clearly. I let out a big sigh as I let go for good. "You'll see, even if you made some mistakes it will come out," said the lab worker who received my offering. "Trust me."

Faith in Jesus is that we can trust what is there to be re-formed, that we can have the courage and confidence to place what we've first been given—the plan, our potential—back into God's hands and receive re-formed hearts, new potential, new life. Grace even lets us do it for and in front of other people, with joy, in thanksgiving, as a celebration, for the sake of the one who offered himself for us. Amen.