

Sermon for All Saints' Sunday, Year A, November 6, 2011  
Matthew 5:1-12

Good Morning!

I am generally not a person drawn to genealogical work, although I find family history to be fascinating. Knowing where I came from, who I am descended from is interesting stuff. I remember the comment made by Sam Portaro, a priest of our Church, who grew up in the Deep South. He said in that part of the country, a new person was never asked what he or she did for a living. Rather they were asked “who are your kin, who do you come from, who are your people?” It was a way of establishing identity to know a person's lineage.

When I was younger, I used to go over to my parent's house from time to time for dinner. We would eat in the family room at a small table that faced a wall adorned with family pictures. Now these were not pictures of my family – my parents, sister, and I. Nor were they pictures of my sister and her family, or of Margaret and me with our three kids. Those pictures were on the refrigerator door. The pictures on the wall were of my parents at a much younger age, and my grandparents, and my great grandparents. There was a picture from the turn of the century showing my maternal grandmother and great aunt with their parents and siblings – they were all dressed in their Sunday best with serious, unsmiling expressions on their faces. I suspect that they were not accustomed to having their pictures taken, and I have the impression from seeing other pictures from that era, that people didn't smile for the camera. But as I looked at the pictures, I thought, “this is, in part, where I came from.” As Sam Portaro pointed out, these are my kin, my people. Or as my brother-in-law likes to say, these are my peeps.

One of the books that I have at home is a genealogy that came from my paternal grandmother. It is of the Augur family, and as far as I can tell, this part of the family came through my grandmother's mother's side. The book was published in 1904 and it tells me that the Augur family has been in this country since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the entries in the book do not include pictures and often have the barest of descriptions about the people. But there are two people of note from this side of the family who have made it into the history books. One was a fellow by the name of Hezekiah Augur.

He was a distinguished sculptor who had work featured at the Yale Peabody Museum, and at least two or three pieces of sculpture that were on exhibit in the U.S. Supreme Court Building. I have no idea if they are still on display but in 1904, they were. The other person of note was Christopher Columbus Augur whose claim to fame was that he was a two star general in the Union Army during the Civil War. He was a graduate of West Point, a veteran of the Mexican-American war of the 1840's, wounded in the Civil War, and ended up commanding the defenses of Washington, D.C. for the last year and a half of the war. Both men, as I have mentioned, can be found in various history books. But for the rest of the Augur family, as far as I can tell, have largely slipped into obscurity.

The family that is described in this genealogical book, and the pictures that were featured on the wall of my parent's house are mostly of people that I never knew or met. But in spite of that, I am still bound to them. They are my people, my kin.

Today is All Saints' Sunday when we commemorate not only the witness of the great saints in Church history, but we bear witness that we are in relationship with all those people of faith who have gone on before us through our shared faith and love in Christ. The Communion of Saints reminds us that the Church in this life is united to the Church in the next life – the Church in paradise. This day invites us to be inspired by the examples of the great saints in history, but also reminding us that in the New Testament sense, we too are saints. Every Christian believer is counted among the saints of God. This day reminds us that we, as people of faith, stand on the shoulders of twenty plus centuries of Christian witness. Some of our predecessors in the faith are known to us – we find them described in the pages of history. But the great majority of Christian people who have preceded us are lost to history. But they played a role in the transmission of the faith to us, as we will for those who follow us.

Like the family members that we are descended from, our spiritual lineage is similar. We are descended by our faith from all Christian people who have gone on ahead of us. In response to the question, “who are your people, where do you come from, who are your kin?” – our answer is the Communion of Saints. From the perspective of faith, that is where we come from – those are our people – our kin.

In the foreword of the Genealogical book of the Augur family, the author described the family as coming from good New England stock. He said they were men and women who were strong, vigorous, with good moral character, who tried to live in the fear of God and who sought to do good. It sounds like it could be a description of the saints of God, perhaps another way of restating the beatitudes from our gospel lesson. And the author of the foreword to this book concluded with the words, "Let no one lightly regard his or her ancestry." That's good advice to take to heart whether we are considering our family histories, or the message of this day. It's keeping in mind who we are, where we have come from, and who our people are.