Sunday, February 13, 1977
THE GERMAN CONNECTION (No. 1 in a Series: Our Tradition and How it Speaks to Us)
Genesis 12:1-4; Luke 9:57-62

The book, “ROOTS” by Alex Haley and the T. V. series-based on it have caused many people to wonder about their own roots. Who are our ancestors? Where did they come from? Why did they come to this country? These are important questions because as we noted in last Sunday’s sermon--knowing and remembering the past can give meaning to the present and hope for the future. So today and in a future sermon, we will be taking a brief look at some of our spiritual roots and how we came to be what we are.

If we wanted to begin as far back as possible, we would need to begin with Abraham in the Old Testament and God’s covenant with him for that is the genesis of the Hebrew religion which is the cradle for Christianity. Our deepest roots are still to be found in the Hebrew way of thinking and in the Hebrew religion. Jesus Christ came out of this background. The Christian Church began as an offshoot of the Jewish religion.

Since its beginning, the Christian Church has over the years branched out in a number of directions. Most of us who think of ourselves as Protestants trace our roots to Martin Luther who was the great initiator of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s.

But let’s begin with the present and look back at our connections. This congregation, First-Plymouth Congregational Church, is a part of the family or denomination known as the United Church of Christ. The main roots of the United Church of Christ go back in two basic directions, one begins with the Pilgrim, who landed at Plymouth Rock and before them the English Reformers, and the other main root can be traced to the German Reformers, including Martin Luther. This morning we are going to look more specifically at the German connection.

The German denomination which joined with the Congregational Christian Churches in 1957 to form the United Church of Christ was known as the Evangelical and Reformed Church. The Evangelical and Reformed Church was itself a merger of two German background groups — The Reformed Church and the Evangelical Synod of North America.

The Reformed Church or as it was originally known the German Reformed Church in this country, had its beginning among the German speaking people in Europe. Although Martin Luther’s teachings had won rather quick acceptance throughout most of Germany and in other parts of central Europe, there were other reformers who were at work.

Disagreement arose among these reformers over such matters as the nature of the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion. The reformers all rejected the Roman Catholic idea that in the Mass the bread and wine were changed miraculously into the body and blood of Jesus, but the Lutherans insisted that Christ was in the elements. The other reformers stressed the necessity of faith as a basis for Communion with Christ.

Persons like Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin became the leaders in the “Reformed” branch of the Reformation, while the followers of Martin Luther continued the Lutheran branch. However, all of the reformers gave more authority to the laity in the leadership of the church. The Roman Catholic Church was a priestly hierarchy. Under Zwingli and Calvin, Elders and Deacons were elected by the members of the congregation to form a church council and this council shared the rule of the church with the ministers.

But how did the Reformed Christians, followers of Zwingli and Calvin and others get to this country from Germany? In the middle of the 1600s, because of a recently concluded long war and all of the problems caused by war — economic depression and general dissatisfaction, some persons in Germany began to look toward the new world in America. Enticing letters and exaggerated advertisements by professional agents led many to begin their migrations to this country. Pennsylvania was the best advertised colony and William Penn the most enthusiastic promoter for the land that held golden promises.

The first German immigrants came to the ports of New York and Philadelphia. From there, they scattered over a wide territory, northward up the Hudson River, northwestward and westward and south into part ·of Virginia. Some went farther into North Carolina. It was chiefly from these early migrations that the foundation of the Reformed church in the United States was laid.

No matter where they settled, the German Reformed people organized religious services. The first regular organized congregations were the work of John Philip Boehm, a devout schoolteacher. In Europe, teachers had often been called upon to lead religious services and this practice was brought to the United States.

During these early years, the German Reformed congregations received much help from the Dutch Reformed Church in Holland. From it came financial support, directions, and ministers.

Following the Revolutionary War, the German Reformed congregations separated themselves from their dependence of the Dutch Reformed Church and. formed the Synod of the Reformed High German Church in the United States of America.

In 1819, the German Reformed Church was subdivided into 8 districts. Later the church spread farther west into Ohio. In 1863, the name was changed again, and the General Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States was organized.

By 1934, the Reformed Church had grown and had a total membership of 348,189. It has organized a number of colleges and two seminaries. Incidentally, our new Associate Minister, John Philip Smeltzer traces his roots back to the early German Reformed Church. He is probably named after John Philip Boehm.

But this is only part of our German connection. We have another root which comes from a different part of Germany.

After its first century of progress, the fervor of the Protestant movement in Germany began to die down. A low ebb was reached by the end of the Thirty Year's war in 1648. This is part of the reason many of the German Re-formed people came to America.

The church was increasingly controlled by government. The leaders of the church argued about correct forms of belief and right doctrines of salvation. There was more concern about right doctrine than about persons.

Because of this a number of missionary societies had grown up in German and Switzerland — these were primarily lay movements. These societies emphasized prayer and Bible study. In 1804, the famous Basel Bible Society was organized. It specialized in a program to train missionaries for work in foreign lands.

While all of this was going on, King Frederick William III of Prussia wanted to unite rival Protestant forces in his territory. So, on the 300th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, 1817, Frederick issued a decree uniting the Reformed and Lutheran Groups in a common form of worship.

The decree brought mixed reactions. One of the results was the formation of a stricter group of Lutherans, who were the ancestors of the Missouri Synod and other strictly Lutheran churches.

On the other hand, many of the people who favored the coming together of the Reformed and Lutheran groups in Germany were the ancestors of those who later came to this country and formed the Evangelical Synod of North America.

Other factors that helped determine the character of these settlers in America were the political and economic conditions then prevalent in Germany. The war that liberated Prussia from Napoleon in the early 1800s caused hard times. The farmers and workers were hit the hardest; crop failures and the lack of money caused widespread misery among many.

By 1816, near famine conditions prevailed. The letters from America glowed with reports of opportunities and wealth. All conditions were ripe for migration. Many of these German settlers stopped near the Atlantic ports, but more of them continued westward. Others came by way of New Orleans and up the Mississippi River. They settled in Missouri and Illinois, with St. Louis as their base of operations.

They brought their religion with them. Pious laymen and freelance ministers served these people. Individual congregations were organized and were congregational in style.

Soon the Basel and Barmen Missionary Societies became interested in the German pioneers in this country. They sent missionary pastors to work with the struggling congregations.

On September 28, 1840, two ministers sent an invitation to a number of German Evangelical pastors. The invitation was to a meeting for the purpose of organizing the German Evangelical Churches into some sort of fellowship to overcome the isolation and loneliness. Six men were present at the meeting, and it was at this meeting that Der Kirchenverein des Westens (The German Evangelical Church Society of the West) was formed.

It is interesting to note that this pioneer German Church was aided in its early years by the Congregational Home Missionary Society. Between $7000 and $8000 was appropriated during 1841-1861. Little did they know then years later the Congregationalists and these German Evangelicals would be one United Church.

In 1872, the German Evangelical Church Society of the West, came to be known as the Evangelical Synod of North America. The new name was chosen then because by that time three different groups of churches, all German in origin, had come together in one organization.

The new denomination was soon publishing a magazine and it created Boards for Home and Foreign Missions, Christian Education, pensions and relief, evangelism and social action. The Evange1ica1 Synod a1so ear1y in its history took seriously its responsibilities to provide for orphans, the aged, and invalids. Thus orphanages, hospitals and other kinds of caring institutions were started in many places.

It was natural for the German people of the Reformed tradition who had come in earlier immigrations and those of the Evangelical congregations to get together. As early as 1927, unofficial meetings between Evangelical and Reformed pastors were held. After a series of meetings, the plan of union between these two German background denominations was adopted in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 26, 1934. The service of worship to celebrate this event was held coincidently in the building of a Congregational Church.

It was just 23 years later in 1957, when the Evangelical and Reformed Church joined with the Congregational Christian Churches to form the United Church of Christ.

But what does this German connection bring to us?

1. First, the people of German background who formed the Evangelical and Reformed Church in this country were people who believed that persons are more important than dogma. They had experienced too much church fighting over minor details of theology and thus were determined to maintain unity and at the same time allow diversity. These ancestors of our faith saw the need for churches working together.

2. Secondly, the roots of the Evangelical and Reformed Church go back to several of the foremost Protestant Reformers — to Martin Luther who sought to recover the gospel of the New Testament. The Christian life, Luther emphasized, is not a painstaking effort to earn God's approval. Rather it is a response to the good news of Christ that God loves all people and forgives us our sins.

We also trace our roots to John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli who emphasized the Kingship of Christ over this world and all its institutions. They developed a form •Of Christian life which brought lay leaders into governing the church. Calvin also emphasized the need for Christians to be activists — in the church and in the political and economic life of society. Our Christian faith is not to be separated from all other areas of life. Therefore, we must keep our faith and worship as relevant as possible, being willing to change and to see new issues. Thus, it is no accident that one of the great American theologians come out of the Evangelical and Reformed tradition. Reinhold Niebuhr.

3. Thirdly, our Evangelical and Reformed roots show that the members of these congregations stressed that the local church congregation is the basic foundation for all church life. Our German connection people like those of the English congregationalists were always cautious about giving too much power or authority to a hierarchy. The people of the German connection were congregational in spirit if not in name.

Overall, our roots in the German connection show that our forefathers and mothers in the faith believed in nurturing., and appreciating their own tradition, but at the same time were willing to recognize the good in other denominations and were ever ready to join hands with them that God's will might be done in this world.