

Tradition! (Kirkin' o' the Tartan)
Special Service – 30 September 2018

Psalm Reading: (124)
NT: 2 Thes. (2:13-17), Mark (7:1-8, 14-16, 21-23)

Tradition! I love it! We surround ourselves with reminders of long ago, and we emulate things we did in the past. We do this because it helps define who we are and helps us to lay out a road map of where we are going in the future. There is so much we did in ages gone by that was successful, and so we cling to tradition.

As you are all well aware the Presbyterian Church has roots in Scotland. The founders of the church were committed Christians who wanted to organize the church as closely as possible to the way it was organized by the Apostles. They wanted a theology that was based on the Word of God in the Bible. Their leader, John Knox, went to Geneva and studied under John Calvin and so brought reformed ideas back to Scotland with him, which means we are a branch of the reformed faith. So we believe we are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, and we know this from the Biblical Word and for it we give glory to God alone.

Now, most of that does not sound specifically Scottish does it? That is because our joint heritage with all Christians goes back through the Reformation all the way back to the time of Christ. This means that our Scottish heritage does not have so much to do with our theology, but has more to do with how we do things, and maybe has a bearing on our outlook on life.

Probably the most well known things about Scots is that Scots have clans, and Scots have Tartans and Scots have a distinctive dress that involves kilts and sporans and are quite fond of tea and scones, and very fond of trifle, when they can get it. The most important aspect of this visible heritage, I would say, is the clan. What are clans? Well, they are family units, kind of like the tribes of Israel we read so much about in the Old Testament. You may remember that when the Israelites entered into the Promise Land they settled different areas by family groups and relied on those groups for support and survival.

Well, in general, Scottish clans or families lived in a rugged country, sometimes in isolated locales. So, like the Israelites, the clans became very close. And they developed a way of identifying themselves. In their distinctive dress they wore a plaid material, a tartan, so they could tell at a glance what family a person came from. And it was important to them, because it was like a uniform identifying themselves to each other in times of both peace and war.

I am wearing the Clark Tartan. It is a material with a distinctive pattern, different from all of the others on our tartan banner. If you know your Medieval history, then you know that the clergy of those times were the ones who could read and write and became the clerks in the government, and Scottish for clerk is “clerk”. So I, as a member of the clergy, have a kind of warrant to wear the Clark tartan. I have something in common with other “clarks” or clergy and so in a sense band together with them.

The great thing about clans or families is that they look after their members. They fret and worry about each other. In my short time here at the First Presbyterian Church of Alpena I have seen first hand how true this is of our people. We are a clan that looks after its members. When people are sick or feeling down, there is always someone who prays for them, takes concern for their physical and spiritual needs. So we as Presbyterians see a very positive side to this whole clan thing and some of the traditions that we associate with Scotland. But as Christians, we must ask ourselves, "What does Jesus have to say about these traditions that we hold so dear?" We have a passage from the Gospel of Mark that speaks directly to this subject.

And I love this reading. The Pharisees catch some of the disciples eating food without having washed their hands first. The Pharisees are totally scandalized. They think this is really bad! (NIV, Mark 7:1-2) They are upset because, as Mark tells us with a certain degree of disdain, the "Pharisees and the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders." (v.3) What is even more ridiculous, (Can you imagine?) The Pharisees go so far as to "wash their cups, pitchers, and kettles!" (v.4) How could they cling to such foolish notions just because it was written in some obscure law by the prophets so many centuries ago?

We can feel from the tone of the words in these four verses that Mark thinks all this ritual cleaning activity is rather silly, steeped as it is in some outlandish tradition. I raised my eyebrows the first time I read this passage. After all, we as modern people, know about the existence of germs. And, what

is more, we as humans can hardly help but cling to our own traditions which are kind of like societal habits. Though I might feel obligated to sympathize with Mark, deep down inside I am on the side of the Pharisees when they put the question to Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?” I mean we wouldn’t want someone with dirty hands serving us trifle or pouring us our tea at fellowship after the service would we?

Then we get Jesus quoting Isaiah, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain, their teachings are merely human rules.” And then he says, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.” (v. 6-8) Ouch, what an indictment, and we can surely feel it. How many of you would give up your ritual hand-washing before dinner?

So we know that Jesus is not just talking to the Pharisees of his day, but he is talking to us because we are so fond of our traditions and, of course, our cleanliness. That cleanliness thing is certainly one of our American cultural traits. And tradition? I mean look, right now we are here celebrating and admiring our Scottish heritage. We are looking forward to tasty scones served on clean plates! Are we being remiss? Are we not convicted by the words of Jesus?

Well, we know that Jesus is not really talking about hand washing, or pot and pan washing. He is not really even talking about tradition *per se*. What Jesus is talking about is an inflexible adherence to tradition that would cause us to disregard what God wants for us and what God wants us to do.

When tradition is the only thing we see when we go through life, when we use it as an excuse to exclude others, when it becomes an inflexible appendage, it is then that it can get in the way of a Godly life. And that is the flip side of what Clans and a close familial relationship can mean. Do we form a shield around ourselves? Do we deny the needs of our fellow humans and save everything for ourselves and our clan? This is how we have to evaluate everything that we do, whether it be tradition or just how we make it through the day.

Now, tradition in and of itself then is not a bad thing especially when it reinforces good behavior. I mean when you think of growing up in the traditions of the church, you can see how in most ways it helps to form you into a better person. I think of tradition as being a part of ourselves. Kind of like our hands are a part of ourselves. They can be put to work for good or bad. Remember what Jesus said about hands in the Gospel of Matthew (5:30)? “If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.”

Imagine holding a hand in front of your eyes. Because you cannot see, that does not make your hand evil. You could be shading your eyes from a bright light, but if your hand causes you to stumble because it is covering your eyes, it is then that it becomes a problem. I think that is what Jesus is talking about here. He does not care whether or not we wash our pots and pans. He does not care if I wear pants or I wear a kilt. He just doesn’t want an obsession with tradition to get in the way of what is important. In fact, anything that becomes an obsession can get in the way of our relationship with God.

So if our honoring of Clans and Tartans makes us exclusive, makes us think that we are better than everyone else, while forgetting the unity with all people that God would want for us, then, yes, that would be bad.

Now there is something you should know about our Scottish heritage and traditions. Although there are Tartans representing individual clans, as well as many states and countries, there are also what are called universal tartans, in essence these are tartans of all people. So just as there are nuclear families, extended families, etcetera, there is the clan of all people. It is a way of saying, “Yes, we as humans are all members of the same family.” We honor this in our church. I think we do a good job reaching out to our world-wide family through our missions and with a standing open invitation to all to participate in a life in Christ.

So we remember this as we celebrate our heritage and invite others into this heritage. I feel that I myself have been invited, I may even say, “I have been called.” I am going to make a confession to you. As far as I know I have no Scots blood coursing in my veins. Yet, here I am adopting a tartan, the Clark tartan. I have chosen to wear Scottish dress for the day. For today I am a Scotsman, and for having adopted the role, I am all the more fervent in my devotion to it. I feel at liberty to steep myself like a teabag in the boiling pot of Scottish heritage because it has meaning for me in my faith and in my outlook on the world, and I dive into it because it lifts me up. I am better for it. It is a way to learn. It is a way to reach out.

And you know, there is something similar in being a Christian. We have our traditions, the things we do every Sunday. And these are a way to help us form a habit that brings us closer to God. But if that was all we did it would soon become a hand in front of our face causing us to stumble. It would be a blind obedience to the past. Simply doing, but not feeling a connection with God. So on occasion we must step outside of those traditions in a spontaneous way, and ironically the Kirkin', a celebration of tradition, is one way we do step out of that every-week mold. It gives us the ability to view our lives and our faith in ways that are fresh to many, yet tried and true. So I encourage you, whether or not you have a Scottish name, to revel in this celebration. And in your participation to come to understand what this celebration is really about. It is about us all (everyone in this sanctuary, everyone in this world) being one family, one clan, and within that family having a shared experience in loving and living out a God centered life.

Please bow your heads and pray with me...

Eternal and Triune God you have made us all one clan, one family. Help us to focus on you and your love within the context of our lives. Lord remove the blinders from our eyes so that we will not stumble. Love us and be with us. All this we pray to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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