

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church on September 10, 2023.

## HERITAGE

<Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 119:33-40; Matthew 18:15-20>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

In 1746, not far outside of Inverness, clans of the Scottish Highlands gathered in force, rallying behind the banner of Bonnie Prince Charles, and faced off against government forces of England who were asserting the right of King George to rule. This may or may not be news to you; I confess that, until I started paying more attention to Scottish history, I was unaware of most of the key points, or even nuances and background, of the Jacobite Uprisings. And I'm not here to get into the English/Scottish politics in the wake of The Union Agreement, or of the nuances of Protestant vs. Catholic loyalty; those are other discussions for other days. But there is one event in the midst of this period of history to note: The Battle of Culloden. Because The Battle of Culloden is largely agreed upon to be the day the Scottish Highland culture unraveled and came to an end.

As I mentioned, until recently I had no greater understanding of this, and presumed that the hallmarks and trappings that I associate with Scottish heritage and clans-ship had existed as a part of their culture and identity without break from the time clans were formed in the Highlands up through today. And I took no small amount of pride in the tartans I can claim - the yellow with red of the MacMillans, the red and black of firefighters, and particularly the blue/green with black of the clergy. (Did you know clergy have their own tartan?). I presumed that all these understood trappings of heritage and culture just exist. But in truth, after the failed Uprising of 1745 and particularly The Battle of Culloden in April of 1746, clan life largely dissipated and tartans as a marker of clan affiliation and family largely, of heritage and identity, fell out of common use.

What do we use to identify ourselves, and the values we hold as important? Prior to the failed Uprisings and the Highland Clearances, the clans of Scotland would use their tartans as a visible identifier and representation of family allegiance and history. After the Clearances, when the tartans were outlawed and taken away, it became necessary for the clans - and their members - to view their identity in new ways.

What do we use to identify ourselves?

For generations, the people of Israel identified themselves by the way they were seen by Pharaoh and the Egyptians: as slaves and foreigners. Living in a land that was not their own, and was far from where their families would have called home, the people of Israel had only this identifying perspective which was thus placed upon them: "I am a foreigner and slave, without value." In this, they had forgotten an immutable truth, a fundamental reality. *They had forgotten that they were the people of God!* No matter the circumstances surrounding them or the current situation. No matter the daily reality they

faced. No matter the identity placed upon them by others. No matter. They were the people of God. But they had forgotten. Like the Highlanders whose tartans were taken away, without the visible reminder, they had forgotten.

It's important to note that, in the Passover story, as Moses and Aaron are receiving the instructions from God, that God does not ask them to paint the doorposts and lintels so that God will know which houses to pass over. As if the God of the universe could be so forgetful or unaware. Rather, "it is to be a sign *to the people*."

The blood on the doorways of the Israelite houses is to be a reminder to *them* that they are God's, and that God, ultimately, will provide. From the Seder Haggadah, enacted each year for the Passover celebration, the youngest child is tasked with asking, almost demanding of each member around the table, "What is worship to you?"

What is it that reminds you that you are a member of the family of God? When we speak of our heritage, this is ultimately what it comes down to: what is it that reminds you of who you are, whose you are, and how that identity is lived out and connected to others?

We may tend to think of an answer in visible signs and tangible symbols. If you stop by my study upstairs, you'll see such trappings representing the Buffalo Bills, the Washington Nationals, and Louisville Seminary among others. These are symbols of allegiances and affiliations, experiences and memories which have helped form my identity over the years. But are they the fullness of that identity? Do they truly encapsulate the heritage which has shaped and molded me? To a degree they do, but not completely. On what, then, does my understanding of my identity rest?

Jesus would have us focus our identity and our heritage on visible but less tangible items. Our reading from Matthew this morning is a continuation of several similar readings throughout this chapter, having to do with relational and communal identifiers such as protecting the safety and security of the littlest, most vulnerable members of the community, and going outward to connect with those who feel lost and neglected on the margins. On the heels of these exhortations, Jesus brings us again to relationship as a primary characteristic of our identities. Especially in the community of faith, viewing and upholding one another and our connectedness to each other, even when one of us is in the wrong. Perhaps especially when one of us is in the wrong.

Our heritage, the characteristics of our identity, then, are visible in our actions, our words, and our treatment of one another in our church, in our community, and in our world. Our rituals in the church - in this church - are a way of marking and inviting liminal space - space in which we may draw close to God, and recognize that God draws close to us. Liminal spaces are *thin spaces* where the veil between earthly and heavenly is so thin and porous that the two bleed over, one into the other. It's where we can feel the Divine Presence keenly and with ease. And for Presbyterians, Scotland has long been such a thin, liminal space (there's a reason we go to Iona, and send our youth! Maybe it's time for some adult trips, as well...). We need these reminders of liminality.

We are called, in living our heritage, to practice these characteristics and to make the space of our church, the community of our church, one of liminality. To remember and proclaim God's presence. In Exodus, it's the sign of blood on the doorpost and the remembrance of the Passover - God drawing near in deliverance and protection. Liminality. In Matthew, the practice is one of seeking out, uplifting, and honoring relationship, particularly in the community of faith. We aren't always right. We sometimes slip up and make mistakes. I would argue that most of the time it isn't on purpose or with malicious intent. But it happens. And how do we respond? In relationship. Seeking and honoring liminality by recognizing, uplifting, and reminding each other of the *Imago Dei*, the Image of God in each of us.

What defines our heritage? What are we known by? Certainly "Growing, Serving, Celebrating" is one aspect. And we should note that all these have to do with building up and expanding relationship - growing from and with one another, serving alongside one another, and celebrating, joyously, with one another. But what else? Charity. Generosity. Gratitude. Good will. We are known, as the song says, by our love. By our relationships. By our community. By seeking out and lifting up those marginalized or neglected, those in need of good news and hope. In short, by the Kingdom of God.

It's said that Highlanders would secret pieces of their tartan under other pieces of clothing. When worn to church, at a point in the service they would touch the spot where the tartan was secreted, and the minister - in the know of such a sign - would surreptitiously offer a blessing toward their heritage. Nowadays, such secretive approach is not necessary. But the question remains for us in our faith: What might we use as a reminder on a daily basis, to remind us of our heritage and the characteristics of our faith? Perhaps to touch our hearts? Perhaps to tap the inner wrists, to remember our Lord? Perhaps to touch our lips, to be mindful of our words and thoughts? Whatever it might be, may we remember that these acts are mere reminders of our heritage, and our heritage is meant to guide our identity and our living. It is the living of these characteristics which we hold important that truly identifies and defines us. May our heritage be one of faithful community in the world. Amen.