



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
January 21, 2018 Sermon

Remember the Tartans

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 106 (selected verses); Ephesians 2:11-22

It's Heritage Sunday—I bet you noticed that—and we are *celebrating* Heritage Sunday—and *I love* celebrating Heritage Sunday—but you have to admit that someone—not *me*, but someone—could raise a question or two about it.

Someone say, like Rodger Nishioka, who was here last week as our guest preacher and teacher. Rodger is the son of a Presbyterian pastor, born in Hawaii and raised in Seattle. As an adult, Rodger served as the coordinator for Youth and Young Adult Ministries for our national denomination: the Presbyterian Church (USA); he then taught for a number of years at Columbia seminary in Atlanta, an educational institution of . . . the Presbyterian Church (USA). He is now Senior Associate Pastor for Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, one of the largest churches in the . . . Presbyterian Church (USA). Rodger *is* a Presbyterian . . . Presbyterian Church USA. But as you may have surmised from his surname, *his* heritage is not replete with Scottish Tartan (he's actually Japanese-American).

If you attended Rodger's Sunday School class last week, you heard him say (and I quote), "Now about this Scottish Heritage thing you're doing next Sunday . . . [dramatic pause] Yeah, thanks a lot." He said it with good humor and got a good laugh, but he then continued to make his more serious point: "You realize—don't you?—that there are more Presbyterians in both Korea and Kenya today than there are in the United States."

So the first question someone could ask: Is our Heritage Sunday focused perhaps a tad too exclusively on our *Scottish* heritage?

And speaking of that Scottish heritage—you realize—don't you?—that these tartans (and many others) represent Scottish clans, and that those Scottish clans have a long history of well . . . clannishness, that is, of always fighting one another and anyone else who came along (ahem, the English). My family has a record, dating back to the 1820's, of my great, great great grandparents, Hugh and Maria **Macintosh**, traveling from Philadelphia to somewhere near Wooster Ohio to claim a land grant. In Scotland, the symbol of the **Macintosh** clan is a wild cat; their motto is, "Touch not the cat bot a glove." Touch not the cat—the wildcat—without a glove. In other words: "Don't mess with us!"

So the second question someone—not *me*, but someone—could ask is this: aren't we celebrating a heritage that is at best a mixed one, one fraught with division, conflict, and violence?

Now I realize that I have just posed a couple of challenging—you might say confrontational or even combative—questions to a bunch of people wearing kilts. But peace: hold your peace, you of the clans, hold your peace. "Touch not the cat bot a glove!" I come not to question Heritage Sunday, but to celebrate it. But in order to celebrate it, I need to answer those two challenging questions, and to do that I need to talk about our two Scripture readings.

Peace, you of the clans, all you of all the clans—and that means all of you and all of us—peace. For *he* is our peace. So says the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians: Jesus Christ is our peace. In his flesh, he

has made us into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility, between us so that he might create in himself one new humanity, thus making peace, and reconciling us to God in one body *through the cross*, thus putting our hostility to death *through the cross*.

God put our hostility—our hostility towards God and towards one another—to death through the cross. In other words, God took the cross, an instrument of hostility, in fact, the very symbol of hostility (in Jesus' day the cross was the cruelest and most gruesome means of execution) and changed it into an instrument and symbol of reconciliation. You could even say (Paul does, in fact) that God has put death to death through the cross. Again, God takes an instrument of death, the very symbol of death—and changes it into an instrument and symbol of life. The original meaning is still there, still discernible, in fact, you have to discern it to appreciate the new meaning, but it has been incorporated, taken up, into the new one. That's the way God rolls—more on this later.

The other Scripture reading, the one from the Psalms, speaks to the ancient Israelites' forgetting God. They did that a lot. The Old Testament is replete with admonitions to the people not to forget God—and accounts of the many, many times when they did just that. Psalm 106 is only one example. It opens with the Psalmist remembering all the mighty deeds that God did when leading the people out of Egypt:

*God saved them.
He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry;
he led them through the deep as through a desert.
So he saved them from the hand of the foe,
and delivered them from the hand of the enemy.*

But then the Psalmist speaks of the people's forgetting:

*But the people soon forgot your works;
they did not consider your wonderful works;
they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love,*

*They made a calf at Horeb.
They exchanged the glory of God
for an idol of their own making, an idol of their own hands.
They forgot God, their Savior,
who had done great things in Egypt,
wondrous works in Egypt,
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.*

And we do it, too: forget God, that is. Oh, not the way we forget someone's name or phone number . . . the way it just slips our mind . . . no, we forget God the way . . . well, the way we forget ourselves. It sounds like this:

Hey, I'm good, it's all good, it's all right here; I got this; . . . yeah, yeah, God, I know, I know maybe later. . . As for now, I've got it—it's all right here on my phone (they exchanged the glory of God for an an idol of their own making, an idol of their own hands).

And so we forget God: forget all that God has done for us and is doing for us still; forget how much we need God, forget that we are creatures, children, of God who were made to know and love God, made to return the love of God the creator, of God the loving father and loving mother. We forget, in the words of the Psalmist, the wonderful works of God, the abundance of God's steadfast love. Forget that it is in God that we live and move and have our being.

It's not that we explicitly *deny* God or even that God's name just slips our mind; it's more that we don't pay God any mind: we take God for granted, assuming that God will always be there for us, but not really thinking about it, because I'm good, it's all good; it's all right here. I got this. Until some crisis hits . . . And then I realize that I'm not, it's not, it isn't, and I don't. And as for now, . . . Where is my phone Oh my God, I can't find my phone—where is it? It's then we realize that we can't save ourselves and that all of our devices can't save us, either. That's what forgetting God is like—both for us and the ancient Israelites.

And because we are prone to forget God, we need to be reminded. We need mnemonics, memory aids or prompts, to remind us, so that we don't forget God. Deuteronomy Chapter 6:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

To this day, observant Jews employ these mnemonics: the mezuzah being the scroll affixed to the door of the house, the shel rosh as the emblem on the forehead, the shel yad as the sign around the wrist and arms.

And, you may remember from previous sermons, I've suggested ways we can do likewise:

Put these words on your refrigerators; hang them on your rear-view mirrors; make them the background for your cell phones; ink them on your wrist and arms. (Just an illustration: let the record show that I did not—have never, and would never—encourage “tattooing”—even for God.)

But today I want to recommend another mnemonic: tartans. You don't have to have Scottish ancestry to employ a tartan as a mnemonic, anybody can: remember the tartans.

And to prove this, I went to ScotWebClan.com Scotland's oldest and largest online store, *with* the largest tartan choice on earth, *featuring* their own weaving mill, their own expert tailors, AND the world's first tartan library. “You're more than a customer, you're part of the family: traditional Scottish service, quality, and value.” (Craig told me that we purchased these tartans—the ones on these banners—from ScotWebClan some years back.) The website of course has a search engine so that you can access the tartan library: type in a name—your name, any name—and you can see whether it's associated with any particular clan and its tartan.

So I did: “N-i-s-h-i-o-k-a. Nishioka” And I waited. And . . . this may surprise you—nothing . . . nothing came up. (Well, “Nesbit” came up, but that didn't seem quite close enough.) I was disappointed, but then I read this:

*Tartan carries meaning far beyond most fabrics. Its design elements typically signify the interests or allegiance of the wearer. Although most older tartans would represent a Scottish clan or some other kinship group, nowadays tartans are designed for people, events, cities or other geographic entities, military divisions, companies, charities, enthusiasms, churches, schools . . . in fact practically **any** person, persons, group or form of social organization can have its own tartan.*

That's when it dawned on me: you can have your own tartan! Even if no one in your family tree anywhere is Scottish—you can still adopt—you can even design—your own tartan. I kept reading:

*Tartan designs normally include **elements that are meaningful** to the wearer, including **references** to other tartans (for example, by basing part of a new design for a tartan on an existing one), **colors** (colors that have particular meaning for personal or historic reasons, for example a wedding tartan might include the two principal colors to represent the two families being united) and **numerical elements** (the number of threads in a line or the number of lines or bands of the tartan itself. For example, sixteen threads in a band of color might represent the sixteen nations attending a peace conference for which you are designing a special tartan).*

In other words, you can take the elements of one (or more) tartans to create a new one that has its own meaning. The original meaning is still there, still discernible, in fact you have to discern it to appreciate the new meaning, but it has been incorporated, taken up, into the new one. That's the way tartan design rolls.

So: I'm guessing you can see where I'm going: This is what God did with the cross! God took an existing design and made it into something new. God took the cross—the instrument and very symbol of hostility and death—and made it into the instrument of reconciliation and life, a la tartan design.

Remember the tartans.

Every time you see a tartan, including these here today, notice all the crosses—by definition, a tartan is a pattern of criss-crossed horizontal and vertical bands in multiple colors. Take note of all the crosses, a tartan is *all* crosses: a tartan is nothing *but* crosses; remember the tartans.

And if we do, we will remember and not forget all that God has done for us and is doing for us still; we will remember and not forget how much we need God, that we are creatures, children, of God who were made to know and love God, made to return the love of God the creator, of God the loving father and mother. If we do, we will remember and not forget, in the words of the Psalmist, the wonderful works of God, the abundance of God's steadfast love. Then we will remember and not forget that it is in God that we live and move and have our being.

So back to the first question: Is our Heritage Sunday focused perhaps a tad too exclusively on our **Scottish** heritage?

No, because God is creating in Jesus Christ one new humanity, reconciling us to God in one body—*through the cross*. And we see that *in* our Scottish heritage—remember the tartans.

And to the second: aren't we celebrating a heritage that is at best a mixed one, one fraught with division, conflict, and violence?

No, because Jesus Christ is our peace. In him, in his flesh, God has put an end to our hostility—our hostility towards God and towards one another—thus making peace—*through the cross*. And we see that *in* our Scottish heritage—remember the tartans.

This is our true heritage: this is what we—all of us, no matter where on earth we are from or where on earth our ancestors came from—this is what are going to inherit, and in fact are now already beginning to inherit: the peace of Jesus Christ—through the cross. Remember the tartans.

You can guess what I did next, can't you? That's right: I went back to the search engine and typed in "Japan": Right away, up popped: The Tartan of the Japan-Scotland Society (and I quote):

Designed to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the founding of The Japan-Scotland Society Colors: the red is for the Rising Sun of Japan; blue for the flag of St Andrew; and purple for Scottish heather and the color representing nobility to the Japanese; the green represents the expanses of forest typical in both Japan and Scotland.

I have seen this tartan online and I can tell you, it's beautiful—the blue and red predominating, crosses throughout.

And although it is a "restricted tartan"—you need permission from the Japan-Scotland Society to use it—I want to assure you, I have begun the process: some day and some way we are going to have a tie, scarf, kilt, banner, or something made from the Tartan of the Japan-Scotland Society and sent to one Rodger Nishioka, Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village Kansas, United States of America.

It's Heritage Sunday: Remember the tartans. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.