

The Profanity of God's Love
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – May 15, 2022 (Scottish Sunday)

Please Read:
Acts 11:1-18
John 13:31-35

It is said about the Scottish that “they spend all their time in wars, and when there is no war, they fight one another.”¹ Sounds like the church today, doesn't it? In an article this week in *The Atlantic*, Tim Alberta writes, “To many evangelicals today, the enemy is no longer secular America, but fellow Christians, people who hold the same faith but different beliefs.”² In the *New York Times*, Ruth Graham wrote a long article about the seismic shift happening in the church today.³ Honestly, this is not news. We've always been wrestling with how to live our faith, and how the gospel interacts with contemporary culture.

We Presbyterians trace our roots to the Scottish church, and our history is full of conflict and controversy. Conflict is not always a bad thing, really. Augustine once said that “Hope has two beautiful daughters: Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are. Courage to ensure they don't stay that way.” But living into hope and being agents of change has a cost... Patrick Hamilton, a nobleman and teacher at St. Andrew's University in the 16th century, after learning of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith, brought the Protestant spirit which lit the fires of reform in Scotland. Despite an official ban on Protestant thought, Hamilton began teaching and preaching what he had learned. He was condemned as a treasonous heretic and burned at the stake on February 28, 1528.

John Knox was angered by Master Patrick's burning and accompanied George Wishart from Cambridge University as a personal bodyguard. Knox accompanied Wishart and gained notoriety for always carrying a double-handed sword to keep back the crowds when Wishart spoke of the protestant faith. Wishart was also deemed subversive, arrested, and burned at the stake in March of 1546. Let's just say being a hopeful Protestant in 16th century Scotland was risky business!

John Knox was a fighter, though. He joined rebels who had taken over St. Andrew's Castle in protest of Wishart's execution, but Knox was taken into custody and spent a year and a half as a French galley slave. Even when he was set free, Knox didn't feel safe to go back to Scotland, and spent four years with John Calvin in Geneva, a city he called the “the most perfect schole of Christ.” Knox became a pastor to the English-speaking congregation in Geneva and was able to return to Scotland in May 1559.

¹ Fitzroy MacLean, *Scotland: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd, 1998), 63.

² Referenced on-line, Wednesday, May 11, 2022:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/06/evangelical-church-pastors-political-radicalization/629631/>

³ Referenced on-line, Wednesday, May 11, 2022: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/09/us/arkansas-pastor-evangelical-churches.html>

Reforms continued as Knox and five other clergy were invited by the Scottish Parliament to write the Scots Confession which is included in our Book of Confessions. Knox expanded the marks of the true church. Calvin taught that there were two marks by which the true church shall be determined from the false, that being “the true preaching of the Word of God and the right administration of the sacraments.” Knox and his colleagues added the third mark of the true church, that “ecclesiastical discipline be uprightly ministered, as God’s Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished.”⁴ Like every reformer, Knox had his weaknesses, and throughout his ministry, he called for the death of Mary, Queen of Scots, publicly expressing his approval of murder, “always provided it was for the right motives.”⁵

I share some of this history of our Presbyterian Scottish origins for two reasons. The first is to confess that we are a fractious bunch, but we come by it honestly! Secondly, Scottish Presbyterianism has been called the “mother” of all Presbyterian churches because although we may be a cantankerous lot at times, we are not shy to take on important issues of justice and oppression. That’s part of our tradition and part of our history. Knox was a political activist par excellence. There were 12 Presbyterians who signed the Declaration of Independence in this country, encouraged by John Witherspoon, Scottish clergyman and President of Princeton Seminary, the only clergy to sign the Declaration of Independence. King George III actually referred to the revolutionary war here as “the Presbyterian Rebellion.”

Today we celebrated the “Kirkin’ o’ the Tartans.” This tradition comes from a period of oppression and liberation in Scotland. In the 18th century, after the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie at the Battle of Culloden in 1745, the wearing of tartans and clan association was outlawed, an oppressive period that lasted for forty years. In 1785 the laws were relaxed, and the wearing of tartans was again made legal.

Tartans are the symbol of different family clans, and to be able to wear your tartan is a matter of pride. I’m actually wearing a kilt loaned to me by Peggy Hooker. Her husband, George Hooker wore this kilt, and his father wore it before him. In fact, Peggy’s father-in-law who was from Glasgow, wore this kilt when he served as part of The Highland Light Infantry in World War I.

It’s interesting to me that while each clan has a distinctive tartan, the clergy did not wear a family tartan, but had a tartan reserved only for clergy, as clergy were not to serve just one family or clan but called to serve *all* clans.

Which brings us to our lessons today and why we are actually celebrating our Scottish Heritage Sunday. The tartans are a symbol of part of our Presbyterian ethnic and cultural heritage, first for those of you who have Scottish heritage, but also for those of us who have other ethnic, racial

⁴ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 19.

⁵ MacLean, 85.

and cultural heritage. It's a day for us to think about how God loves us *all*, but also calls us all to be agents of change. Jaroslov Pelican once commented that "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, and traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." We are all called to celebrate the living faith of our ancestors and to live forward in a way that gives life and liberty for all. I'm Swiss, and my family history is Mennonite. Some of you here come from Methodist or other protestant backgrounds. Not a few of you are from the Roman Catholic tradition. Some of you have European heritage, and some of you have African heritage. Some of you have Asian or Latin heritage. The point is, God loves us all and calls us to love our neighbors, even our enemies.

In the Acts passage, Peter was accused by his Jewish critics of eating with a gentile. You'll remember that the prayer of the more traditional Jewish male was "thank God I'm not a slave, a gentile or a woman." Pretty offensive, but it was not OK for the religious folk of Jesus' day to sit at table with a someone who was not Jewish. But the vision for Peter to do this was given by God. God called Peter to go to Cornelius' house, a Roman military officer, and to eat with him, and to eat food that for all of Peter's life he had been told was not "clean" to eat.

Peter heard God saying to him, three times, which means I think God means to be heard on this: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This Greek word translated as profane here can most simply be translated as "common," but can also be translated "unholy" or "profane." The word profane comes from the Latin *profanus* which means "outside the temple."

This was God's way of saying to the followers of Jesus, "There is no one outside of my love, and you shall not limit your love to those things that have traditionally been inside the temple, but you shall love everyone!" Cornelius, ironically, a military commander in the Roman army, is thought to be the first gentile convert...

Last weekend, I was privileged to be able to take a couple days of retreat at Trinity Wallstreet's camp up in West Cornwall to hear talks by Diana Butler Bass based on her recent book, *Freeing Jesus...* Her book was inspired by an event that happened to her at the National Cathedral in Washington. She was praying in the Chapel of the Holy Spirit that has a rather large and colorful image of Jesus on the wall. She was having a tough day and so just wanted to go to a quiet place to pray. She knelt down in the silence of the cathedral and after a few moments, she heard a voice, "Get me out of here!" She looked around thinking that someone was in the chapel was with her. But no one was there. And so she bowed her head to pray again. But again the voice came, "Get me out of here!" She wondered, "Is that you, Jesus?" A third time she heard the voice, "Get me out of here!" She got up and went home, disturbed. She didn't tell anyone but her husband about the incident but realized that this experience had meaning for the larger church.

I would agree with her. We in the church have over the centuries largely domesticated Jesus and tried to house-train him. Of course, Jesus isn't in need of freeing from us. But we need to be set free from the reduced and manageable exclusivist Jesus we have settled with for so long. As we read in the Acts text, Jesus knows no limits, no boundaries of ethnicity, religion, gender or race. We are called to love as he loved, and that includes loving even those who are different from us, even those we call enemies.

Another irony, perhaps, but this is good news worth fighting for. It's just that we fight not by *taking* lives, but by *giving* our lives. We are called to be militants for peace, meeting conflict with tolerance and self-giving love. It's harder than you might think. It surely requires more creativity.

So whether you're Scottish, Ghanaian, Mexican, Korean, Swiss, English, Democrat, Republican, straight, gay or whatever, the Good News we are to lift up the highest in the kirk, is that we *all* are the clan of Christ, the household of God; we *all* are beloved children of God. And our love for one another is an act of Easter witness. By our love people will know that Jesus lives on. Our love for all, profane and holy, saints and sinners alike, is God's glory for all.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.