

Hand-Me-Down Tradition

Heritage Sunday Sermon on Romans 11:13-24

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

You may have heard of the phrase No True Scotsman -

it's a famous fallacy type in which counterexamples to a claim are dismissed
as not "true," "authentic," "real," or "pure," and therefore invalid.

If you were a TRUE Scotsman, you'd like haggis.

And if you don't, it doesn't matter what your DNA and family tree have to say about it.

I'm not a true Scotsman - not by blood anyway.

(I sure hope I'm not a walking falacy.)

Perhaps it seems a strange practice we have here to celebrate an ethnicity that,
in the usual sense, only a few of us are.

In the Scripture I just read, Paul is trying to explain something similar to the Christians in Rome -
who were mostly Gentiles, that is, they were not Jewish, ethnically nor ritually.

This was at a time when Christianity wasn't yet a distinctly different religion.

Paul goes on at some length

about how the Jewish rejection of Christ Jesus as their Messiah is not final -
that there was still hope for them.

That the Jewish heritage of the church as a whole was not a bad thing.

Paul uses the imagery of olive branches -

wild ones representing the gentiles
and cultivated ones to signify the older Jewish line of the people of God.

These Gentile Christians have been grafted into something bigger,
something not dependent on their own identities. So have we.

In the ancient world, identity was a communal thing, and based partially on parentage,
but more so on participation in the traditions
and shared practices and rituals of the community.

It reminds me of how my dad would always tell me

that even though I was mostly Norwegian in genetics,
that I was Polish, Polish by osmosis.

Simply by being part of the family.

And as being part of this church family, I'm going to count myself as honorarily Scottish.

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Not only is our Heritage Sunday celebrations fun,

(I think so anyway - the sound of bagpipes is one of the most glorious sounds I can think of),

I really welcome the reminder that the church is not about us.

It has a history and a life that we get to join, participate in, and benefit from the goodness of the root.

I don't mean to suggest that our church is all actually about it's heritage either,

or that everything it has decided and all people connected to it have been infallible.

Paul writes of some branches of the good cultivated vine with the good roots

as having withered and failing to produce good fruit,

and therefore had to be pruned away,

or as one Church Fathers put it,

“It was not God who cut them off but rather they broke themselves off and fell.... You see what a great thing man's free choice is, how great the working of the mind is. For none of these things is immutable, neither your good nor their evil.” (John Chrysostom)

But the roots remain good, and branches grafted on might be tamed.

In focussing on what's good and binding our own roots to it,

there's a lot that can be gained from traditions.

The word tradition comes from the Latin *traditio* -

(what am I actually giving you Latin instead of Greek today?!)

Anyhow, this word *traditio* literally means to hand over, hand down, pass along.

There is a sense in which traditions are hand-me-downs.

Much like heritage, which relates to ideas of inheritance, that which is passed down to you.

That which comes from the roots to which we've been grafted.

So...what is that for us?

Let's consider some of the hand-me-down gems buried deep in our closet of history.

I'm not expert in Presbyterian history - my field is medieval stuff,

before the Presbyterian, or any of the Protestant churches came into being.

But I can tell you there is some beautiful stuff back there

found in the Scottish church that would give rise to Presbyterianism.

The flavor of Christianity that took root in Scotland, is in my opinion one of the bestest flavors,

is a Celtic Christianity.

I was taking a class at Saint John's a few summers back on early monastic spirituality.

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The first day we went around and introduced ourselves.

There was a woman a few seats down from me who added on to her introduction,

“I’m sure I’m the only Presbyterian in the room.”

I know the feeling, the majority of the students were Catholic,

with a few Anglicans scattered in, sometimes the odd Orthodox.

So I did the human thing and introduced myself as “the other Presbyterian in the room.”

At that point, the woman seated next to me grabbed me in hug,

saying she was also Presbyterian and was so excited she wasn’t the only one.

Later on another student, one of the Carmelite sisters I think it was,

asked me what the Presbyterians were putting in their kool-aid

that made us want to spend a week at a monastery learning about the spiritual life!

There weren’t Methodists, nor Lutherans, nor Baptists there. Why so many Presbys?!

I can’t speak for the others, but I suspect it has something to do with those Celtic roots.

That is, there’s a certain nostalgia for places like Iona -

that first monastery an Irish monk by the name of St. Columba

first built on the lands that would be Scotland.

In some ways Iona remains a center of our spirituality.

The monastic character of the Celtic church was fundamental

to how Christianity would be practiced there.

Scotland, never having been conquered by Rome,

didn’t have big Roman-style cities, or many cities at all.

Most people there tended to be rural,

living a pastoral life tending sheep and goats and such out in the hilly wilds.

And out in the wilderness was exactly where monk tended to want to be,

away from the noise and bustle of the city.

And this put them where the people were.

There are tales of monasticism being so prevalent

that Celtic Christians assumed that in all churches,

the leader was referred to as an abbot.

This monastic character has its effects in a love of simplicity, solitude, silence,

and also a love of nature.

In stories of Celtic saints, there are many a mention of

the connection with animals many of them enjoyed.

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Perhaps most famously St. Kevin who was so still and tranquil in body and spirit
that a bird came and nested in his hands, outstretched in prayer.

The natural world is seen as fundamentally good, as God created it.

And that we, as human creatures, have a kinship with creation.

In the more Romanized churches of the same era,

there was often in place of this emphasized
an adversarial relationship between man and the rest of creation,
highlighting the damage done in the Fall.

But the Celtic perspective tended to focus far more on the positive.

People too were, at least at their core, good, with incredible potential.

This view actually got some of them into trouble with Church in Rome,

thinking that they were pushing human free will and inherent goodness
to a point where God didn't seem to be needed.

But God was very present in Celtic spirituality.

There's a deep respect for the world of spirits, overlapping into our natural world.

You may have heard of the idea of "thin spaces" -
a Celtic concept of places that just feel holy,
where the divine seems to seep through palpably.

There is an acceptance of there being a spiritual world here, veiled yet present,

rather than being far off, up in the clouds somewhere
as is sometimes emphasized in other Christian schools of thought.

This can even be seen in more modern symbology.

As other nations were choosing eagles and lions and bears - oh my - as their national animals,

Scotland went, "We're going with the Unicorn!"

It shows a certain spunk I think.

Yes unicorns are beautiful and perilous - they can actually be quite fierce in the old myths -

but there's also the fact that they are ... mythical.

The only other place I know of that made a similar move was Wales with its red dragon.

There's something fitting that it is the Celtic fringe that associates itself with the world of myth and mysticism.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*