

13 November 2016

Proper 28, Year C: Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Bread of Life Stewardship Sunday; Kirkin' of the Tartans; the Sunday after the presidential election.
St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Norman, Oklahoma

In 1746 the Parliament of Great Britain passed a law known as the "Dress Act" which forbade the wearing of traditional Scottish garb, including kilts and any form of tartan. This was part of a series of acts intended to bring the Highland clans into a more unified national identity, after a series of uprisings intended to restore the Stuart monarchy in Scotland and England. Other forces were at work, and in the years which followed many Highlanders were forced off their ancestral lands, more-or-less willingly resettling in other parts of Scotland, England, or even across the sea in the American colonies.

During the time of the Dress Act, the people would pin a small piece of tartan cloth inside their coat, or under their skirt, or someplace on their person where it remained unseen. In church on Sunday, as the minister gave the final blessing (the "kirkin'") the people would touch the place where the tartan was pinned, as a gesture of fidelity, solidarity, and resistance.

This is the legend.

If you go to Scotland today and ask a native about the tradition of the Kirkin' of the Tartans, he or she will likely look at you very strangely indeed. For it is a thoroughly American creation.

In 1941, the Rev. Peter Marshall, pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. preached a sermon about "the kirkin' of the tartans" as part of an effort to raise support and funds for the war effort. It was an appeal to his own heritage as a born Scotsman and to the family heritage of many of his congregants, and it worked. The tradition was soon carried to the Cathedral of Sst. Peter and Paul (aka the National Cathedral) and around the country, anywhere there were sons and daughters of Scotland who wore the plaid in pride and gratitude, whose hearts stood at attention at the sound of the pipe and drum.

To be proud of one's heritage is a fine and noble thing. To remember those who have come before us with thanksgiving, and seek to emulate the good things they did in their own time, is a good and honorable thing.

But.

To imagine that life was less complicated, or less confusing, or less ambiguous, "back in the good old days" is an illusion and a fantasy.

To suppose that our ancestors were always wise, or good, or well-intentioned, is deceptive.

To venerate any heritage, any story of national or ethnic identity in which we stand, as if it were our principal identity, is to make a false God. It is to commit idolatry.

When my paternal grandmother had to close her home and go into an assisted living facility, among the things I received was a book entitled "We are Czech". This was a narrative history of the town of Snook, Texas, outside of College Station, where she had grown up. Late in the 19th century her parents had immigrated from the part of the world now called the Czech Republic. In the New

World of central Texas, they and many of their countrymen found a place to establish themselves and make a new life and community. Throughout the book, the writer (himself a childhood resident of Snook and of Czech descent) relates numerous situations where the children of the town wanted to have or do something in the same way as their friends in surrounding communities. And over and over they were told: “They are American; we are Czech.”

I doubt that the neighbors would have disagreed or argued the point at the time. Despite the fact that my grandmother and her seven siblings were all born in Texas and never lived anywhere else their entire lives, they carried that identity with them to the end. “We are Czech.”

This became a problem when, for instance, my grandmother met and married my grandfather—who was most definitely NOT Czech. “Not one of us. Not our people. Outsider. Other. Stranger.” That exclusion, that distrust, that bifurcation between “Czech” and “American” resonated through my father’s generation and family life, and even into mine. I remember hearing my father’s cousins referred to in terms that were clearly ethnic slurs, and feeling angry and ashamed. Because that was ME those words were talking about, not just “those people over there.” And not knowing what to say, or do, I said nothing and did nothing.

We’ve just come through a presidential election that has worn all of us to our last nerve. I know this is Oklahoma and the Episcopal Church, but can I get an amen? A lot of the talk during the campaigns has been about “those people over there.” Those people, over there. Across the border, across the country, across the tracks. People in places of power and influence; people in fly-over country, out in the middle of nowhere. People we don’t know. Or trust. Or, quite frankly, even try to know or trust or talk to. It’s a whole lot easier to remain in our own circle, our own like-minded gathering, and talk to ourselves. To talk ABOUT “those people over there.” How foolish and wrong-thinking they are, to believe such things, to vote for such candidates. We’ve all done it. I’ve done it with you; I’ve done it with others.

To be comforted in the company of like-minded friends is a fine thing, and a needful one.

But.

To suppose that we, like-minded friends, have all the wisdom, and knowledge, and good intentions and everyone else is completely wrong...is to create an idol again. To build and worship a false god of our own making.

In the gospel this morning, Jesus confronts his companions with their own obsession around identity. They are in the Temple in Jerusalem, admiring this glorious edifice that is understood as both the earthly dwelling place of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and the national monument of the people of Israel. Jesus tells them that this great complex of buildings, and the city in which it is located, will fall. It is finite, it had a beginning and it will have an end.

By the time the Gospel of Luke was written, that end had already come to pass. The city of Jerusalem, and the temple with it, had been sacked by the Roman army in the year 66 and burned and destroyed. The first hearers of the Gospel of Luke would have known that, possibly have seen

it themselves. The temple, the city, the symbol of the gathering of the people by which they experience themselves as a people—all gone.

Who are we when we lose our symbols of identity? When our relationships with one another are torn apart by strife, split by suspicion and fear? When we cannot, for whatever reason, make the life we thought we were going to have, work any more?

The people of the New Testament were faced with these questions.

“Do not grow weary”, Paul tells his friends in the city of Thessalonica, “in doing what is right.”

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus tells his friends, “when the world seems to be crashing down around your ears. Now is the time to trust in me, that I will be with you and give you what you need. Even in humiliation, even in betrayal, even in death itself.”

“I will give you words [in Greek: “I will give you a mouth”] and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”

Those questions have been asked many times since then.

Life is falling apart, the world is coming to an end, what shall we do, how shall we live?

The Scots ancestors, forced from all they had known and loved, driven to outlandish unheard of places with strange and frightening names like “Nova Scotia”, “South Carolina”, “Texas”, “Oklahoma.”

They brought the words, the wisdom, the values they treasured along with them. They taught their children, and their children’s children. They remembered who they were, and whose they were. On their better days, and in their better selves, they remembered that God is God, and that they—that we—are not. Nor are any of the buildings we build, or imaginings we imagine, or lines in the sand drawn between “Us” and “Them.” Useful perhaps. Necessary, even, at times. But ultimately limited, finite, imperfect.

The ancestors pinned a bit of cloth under their clothes. Hidden to all but themselves; yet a sign and symbol of their highest, dearest, best selves—a hidden truth that showed itself in the way they lived.

We are marked with a hidden sign at our baptism. A cross on our foreheads marks us, with water and the Holy Spirit, as Christ’s own. In Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither rich nor poor, no “us” nor “them” of whatever division. The dualisms fail, because God is bigger and wider and higher and deeper than all our dualisms, all our divisions, all our disagreements.

We have a hidden sign to show forth, “with our lips and in our lives.”

The sign of the cross, where Christ spans heaven and earth and all the cosmos, and draws all of it, and each one of us, into himself.

That sign, that awareness, that reality, that way of life is needed now as much as it has ever been.

Beloved in Christ, do not grow weary in doing good.

Beloved in Christ, do not fear.

Beloved in Christ, be the love of Christ. Today, and tomorrow, and always.