

Sermon: Presbyntensions

Today we celebrate our Presbyterian heritage coming to us from Scotland and the Scots. The many links between the South and Scotland result from the arrival on our shores and in our region of many immigrants who arrived directly from Scotia's shores or by way of what I would remind you was a very brief stop on the Irish isle!

A year or so back a friend shared with me the text of a petition written by a group of Highland Scots who immigrated in 1739 to the Upper Cape Fear River area of North Carolina. These good folks "The Argyll Colony" had arrived in the colonies from Knapdale, and the Kintyre and Taynish peninsulas and the island of Gigha. They petitioned the Synod of Argyll requesting the services of a Minister. Here is the text of the Petition: To the Revered Members of the Synod of Argyle: We the Subscribing Inhabitants on the North West branch of Cape Fear River in Bladen County in the province of North Carolina having taken unto Serious Consideration our Deplorable and Desolate State and Condition for want of Gospel ordinances for some time – would be so happy as to obtain a minister authorized according to the Rules and Discipline of the Kirk of Scotland whose sons we still profess ourselves to be; notwithstanding our great distance from our Native Country. [A congregation today, looking to call a Pastor completes a Church Information Form which describes the congregation and the community it serves. I have never yet seen a CIF which declares a congregation to be in a "deplorable and desolate state".]

Petition continues: Hopeful that you will take our deplorable state into consideration and send us a minister who will be zealous in the Discharge of his Duty, a man of solid piety and Learning who can preach our native language [likely English and Gaelic] whose doctrine, life and conversation keep apace together, who is not too free on the one hand nor too reserved on the other. [Now this is where this Petition sounds a lot like congregation's expectations of potential Ministers today. The Pastor they are seeking must have his life and his beliefs and his conversation in balance – you know a Pastor who is good with the kiddies, great with the youth, able to chat with the seniors, always out visiting the sick and the needy, and always available when you call the church office – you know that sort of thing! Also this great Pastor cannot be too shy nor can they be too outgoing – just that perfect balance – as if any Pastor's are perfect or balanced or perfectly balanced!]

Continuing: We can with confidence assure you that he will meet with all the kind offices and services that be in our power for his further encouragements [listen up, here are the terms of call ... for his further encouragement, as if coming to the wilds of North Carolina wouldn't be enough!!] we agree to pay ten pounds sterling, for his passage on his arrival here [a signing-on bonus – now that sounds like a good idea!] and to pay yearly the sum of seventy pounds sterling for the space of three years; and longer as we and he are agreeable to each other. The Petition had 75 signatures.

Eight years later this Petition was answered when the Rev. Hugh McAden arrived to preach in various locations in the area, and went on to have a very effective ministry among the exiled Scots, founding many new congregations and establishing a strong Presbyterian presence that continues to this very day!

Today I want to explore the genius that is Presbyterianism, a tradition which took root in Scotland, within which many of us are proud to stand, which has nurtured and been expressed in the ministry of this congregation, a tradition that has much to offer every culture and context, a tradition that continues to inspire us in the living of the Christian faith. To do this I want to turn a spotlight on three of the

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tensions that exist in Presbyterian thought and practice. As we consider these - what I am calling “Presbytensions” – we can both understand and celebrate our past and be helped to move into the future to which God is calling us. In our practice of this Presbyterian faith and life we have much to offer a society that is so often devoid of theological discourse, has a very limited attention span, and who prefers a quick fix, to a real change of heart and mind.

The first Presbytension is between EDUCATION and EMOTION. The leader and chief spokesperson of the Reforming movement in 16th Century Scotland was, of course, John Knox. He demanded that there be a Church building and a school in every Parish. Knox insisted that there be a schoolhouse and a trained teacher paid for and provided by the local Parish Church so that all children could be taught to read and write, so they would all be able to read and understand the Bible for themselves.

In the centuries following, the wisdom and success of Knox’s program explains why literacy rates in Scotland were well ahead of those in England [Naturally] and was the reason why many young scholars from poorer households went on to University. Presbyterians carried their love for and commitment to education wherever they journeyed. As they traveled to these shores or to S. Africa, Canada, Australia or India, Presbyterians built and staffed schools, endowed libraries and trained teachers. Many of you know such schools and colleges, they not only continue they thrive!

We Presbyterians believe that since God reaches into our lives in grace in Jesus Christ we must make every effort to use all of who we are, our minds, as well as our hearts, to seek God’s purposes for our lives and for the life of the world. This emphasis on education invites us to see the world through varying lenses unafraid that science and faith are in conflict. God gave us minds to think, and science to understand the world, reason enough for us to object whenever voices are raised to deny or demean science or to promote intelligent design or creationism for shoddy partisan political ends.

Sometimes this stress on education leads some to imagine that we place little value on Emotion! Thus the charge that we are God’s Frozen Chosen; that we only worship God from the neck up! With every fiber in my body, with every beat of my heart, I believe that this is a serious misunderstanding of who we Presbyterians are.

As women and men grasped by the overwhelming grace of the sovereign and loving God – there is emotion.

As people who have and share a real sense of the Holy – awareness of both God’s goodness and our lack of goodness– there is emotion.

As people who are learning to have reverence for God – there is emotion.

As people who have are learning to rejoice in and have a curious respect for God’s creation and for God’s purposes for creation - there is emotion.

As people who seek to practice warm hospitality and offer a genuine welcome, who are vulnerable to those who are in pain, as people who plead for the sick and serve the needy and sit with the dying– there is emotion.

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We may not wear these emotions on our sleeves every day, our preachers may not routinely shed tears as they preach – we leave that to those who have to listen to us! We may not handle rattlesnakes; we may not wave our hands in the air or dance in church too often – though we did just dance a few minutes ago!; but let there be no mistake, there is emotion, and more than just a surface emotion – there is a deep and real Gratitude and Thankfulness – a deep and real emotional response to who God is and all God is doing.

Might we show this emotion a little more often and a little more openly?

Maybe, probably, likely – YES we should – but it is always there. Our love of education is unmistakable, our emotion might be understated but it is deeply felt right in our guts! As Presbyterians education and emotion are both a part of who we are.

The second Presbytension that I have in mind is the tension between a PERSONAL and a PUBLIC faith.

As Presbyterians we know that we need to make a personal response to the living, loving God who meets us in Jesus Christ, who claims us in the waters of baptism and nourishes us in the sharing of communion. Our Personal faith is about making our response to the God who always makes the first move towards us, a response in which we seek to grow in grace, to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. Our personal faith is lived out each day as we seek to live in ways that better reflect who God is and what God means to us.

Our faith is personal and it is also a Public faith. Ours is a public faith because God has gifted to us neighbors and friends, sisters and brothers; because God created us to be in relationship and community; because God calls us into community in the church and in the world; because God has made us our brother's and our sister's keepers. The Parish system of the original Presbyterian denomination, the Church of Scotland, reflects a commitment to be there with and for the entire community - Public faith expressed by serving others.

Public faith also means not been slow or frightened to remind the government of the day about its place and responsibilities. It is part of our Presbyterian identity to pray for those called to exercise authority over the community, as part of this we are to be ready to call to account the President or the Congress or the Governor for their decisions and actions, taken in the name of the people! We are to remind Government of its limitations, not only in the law of the land but under the Law of God.

On behalf of the God of justice we remind those who hold power to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly!

On behalf of the God of every nation we remind those who lead to have compassion for the alien in our midst, to desist from all talk that demonizes, degrades or divides.

On behalf of the Prince of peace we beg leaders to wage peace, to still war drums!

As Presbyterians it is our calling – to pray for and support Public Education accessible to all and excellent, Health and Social services accessible to all and excellent. As Presbyterians we are to have a concern for the entirety of the human experience – we are to be the church for the community, all the

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community. The personal faith is also the public faith relating to every aspect of life – politics, environment, war and peace. Both Jeremiah's New Covenant and Jesus' Beatitudes have personal and public implications.

My third and final Presbytension is that which exists between being REFORMED and being REFORMING. As Reformed Christians we hold to the movement away from the excesses of the medieval church, we hold to the truths of the Reformed tradition with its emphases on the sovereignty of God, that Jesus Christ is our Mediator, we are led and guided by scripture, we are nourished by but two sacraments.

But it is also true that we are also to be Reforming.

Reforming - as the Holy Spirit of God directs so that together we can minister to the needs of every new generation.

Reforming - revising old structures - discovering new ones that will better enable us to carry forward the mission of the church of Jesus Christ.

Reforming as we encourage every person to fulfill the ministry they have from God, by which, women and men, youth and children, from all socio-economic and ethnic origins, can be church together and do ministry together.

These three Presbytensions between: Education and Emotion; Personal and Public; and Reformed and Reforming shape and describe how we have come to experience God and relate to the world, so that we can best live in this world as free and active disciples of Jesus Christ, living so the world can better conform to God's design.

We set out to be followers of our Lord and Savior, unwilling to ever limit what God can do in our midst or in and through our best or weakest efforts.

We are people of deep and lasting faith dedicated to understanding God's mission in the world around us and devoted to participating in that mission.

All the tartans and kilts and bagpipes, all the shortbread and haggis, all the water of life, can never bring anyone to Christ, they cannot tune the world to the heavenly beat, but today our celebrations point us both to our past and to our future as we discover and re-discover our Christian and Presbyterian faith – a faith for yesterday, a faith for today and a faith for tomorrow.

It is to this Christian and Presbyterian faith that I and many of you are committed. We devote our lives to the one Monarch and Head of the Church.

My friends - in the name of the ever-living, ever-loving God - renew your own pledge of faith to your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Let God love you - Let God change you - let God be God - let God live in and through you, in all God's world. In the name of Jesus Christ! Amen.