

A GOODLY HERITAGE

PSALM 16:6-11

A SERMON FOR HERITAGE SUNDAY
OCTOBER 27, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

Nearly forty years ago, I took a two week Presbyterian Heritage Tour. Dr. Charles Kraemer, retired president of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education, was the tour lecturer, and almost five hundred Presbyterians, eleven bus loads, made the trip. When we crossed the English Channel, someone said it was the largest invading force since D-Day. As I prepared for this Sunday, memories of that tour came back. I was reminded that in the words of the Psalmist, we have a goodly heritage.

We began that tour in Scotland. Well, we certainly began our celebration of our heritage today in Scotland, with pipes and tartans. And we think of ourselves as Scots, we Presbyterians. Heritage Sunday is the day we are all Scottish, just as everyone is Irish on Saint Patrick's Day.

But, as Dr. Kraemer pointed out in our first lecture in Scotland, we really are tracing our heritage, our lineage, backwards when we start in Scotland. Oh, to be sure, the Presbyterian form of government was perfected there, and Reformed theology was fine tuned there, but there were many reformers in many countries who contributed to the heritage that became our heritage in Scotland.

Some of those were the Huguenots. I suspect that my family is Presbyterian today not due to a Scottish heritage, but to a French Huguenot great-grandmother. But then the Huguenots were always here first! The first European settlements in the Americas, at Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, and at Fort Caroline, near present day Jacksonville, were French Huguenots. Of course, the Spanish Catholics massacred our first Presbyterians in Florida, but that's another story for another time.

Francis Makemie, considered to be the founder of American Presbyterianism, was born an Irishman, and was ordained by the Presbytery of West Ulster, so our Scots Presbyterian heritage really traces back to an Irishman. But then, many of us claim a Scots-Irish heritage, as does my wife, Polly, who says that if we are still here next year, she's marching with a Clan MacPherson tartan!

Your former pastor, Huw Christopher, claimed a Welsh heritage, and Wales has that unique Calvinistic Methodist Church as its branch of the Presbyterian family, although I think Huw claimed roots in the United Reformed Church of England. And of course his lovely wife, Rachel, is from Valdes, North Carolina, which is the home of the Waldensian Presbyterian Church, founded by the Italian branch of our Reformed and Presbyterian family.

While not truly Presbyterian, the Dutch Reformed Church has contributed much to our heritage, and lest we forget, New York was New Amsterdam for fifty years, before the English took over.

When we look at our confessional heritage in our Book of Confessions, we see a portrait of our heritage, and see that what Dr. Kraemer said is true. And what the Psalmist said, of course.

There are three documents from the time of the Reformation in our Book of Confessions: The Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism from Germany, and the Second Helvetic Confession, from Switzerland. On that long-ago tour, we visited places like Edinburgh, Glasgow, Saint Andrews, in Scotland, and the lovely city of Heidelberg in Germany overlooking the Rhine, and saw the city of Geneva where both John Calvin and John Knox preached, as well as Zurich and Bern, other centers of the Reformation. Our lines have indeed fallen in pleasant places.

The first church Makemie founded was in Maryland. Other Presbyterian pioneers began to settle in places like New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the Carolinas and Virginia. They brought with them the brand new Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms. Written in Westminster Abbey, the home of the famous Big Ben, in London, these were the product of theologians from all of the United Kingdom, which was united for the first time under a King who was James the Sixth of Scotland, though James the First of England, and those first Presbyterian settlers also brought with them the brand-new Authorized Version of the Holy Bible, which we still call today the King James Bible.

The first Presbytery was organized in 1706 in Philadelphia, and it was not until 1789 that there was a meeting of the General Assembly, and it was convened by John Witherspoon, the only ordained minister to sign the Declaration of Independence.

First Presbyterian Church of Marianna, Florida was founded in 1835. American Presbyterianism as an organized denomination was thus only 46 years old when this church began. This church existed for ten years before Florida became a state.

While serving God with faith, hope and love since 1835, this church has in fact been a member of four different Presbyterian denominations. It was a member church of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its founding until the Civil War, when it became a member of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States for the brief duration of the Confederacy. Thereafter, it became a member church of the so-called Southern Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church, U.S. The seal of that denomination continues to grace our sanctuary in the lovely embroidered chairs that sit on either end of the communion table. And then, of course, thirty years ago this year, the two branches of American Presbyterianism divided by the Civil War re-united, and this church became a part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

We have a goodly heritage. God has blessed us. To paraphrase the words of the Psalmist, our hearts are glad, our souls rejoice, we rest secure. With the Psalmist, we pray that God will show us the path of life, and that we may experience the fullness of the joy in God's presence forevermore, for truly our lines have fallen in pleasant places, and we have a goodly heritage.

