

OUR HERITAGE, THEIR LEGACY

PSALM 90:1-6; 13-17
MATTHEW 22:34-46

A SERMON FOR HERITAGE SUNDAY
OCTOBER 26, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations...” Psalm 90:1

This year of 2014 is a special year for those of us of the Reformed and Presbyterian Tradition. We celebrate the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Knox. Now if John Calvin was the father of our theology, John Knox was the founder of our Presbyterian form of government, and of our Scottish way of worship and service.

If not for John Knox, we might never have had a Church of Scotland, mother church of American Presbyterianism, or a Scots Confession, which set the first principles of Presbyterian government and theology in English. Indeed, it was John Knox who was a mentor to a little boy called “Jimmy”, who grew up to be crowned King James VI of Scotland and James I of England and who authorized what we know today as the King James Bible. Indeed, John Knox preached the sermon at the Coronation of King James.

Unless you have studied church history, and particularly the history of the Presbyterian Church, you may never have heard about John Knox.

There is a story told of an American business man, arriving at the airport in Edinburgh. He had hired a car for his visit, and his chauffeur met him with a warm welcome to Scotland, and asked if he would like to see any of the sights, for example, the House of John Knox.

The businessman declined, saying, “Take me straight to my hotel.” Arriving at the hotel, the driver was dismissed until first thing in the morning, when he picked up the businessman again, asking, “Would you like to see the house of John Knox now?”

“No,” said the American, I have an important meeting at Barclay’s Bank on Princes Street.”

And so the driver took him to Princes Street, and awaited his bidding. When the businessman jumped in the car, he instructed the driver to take him straight to the airport. “Do ye not want to at least drive by the house of John Knox?” “No, I have a plane to catch.”

At the airport, as the American gathered his papers, and tipped his driver generously, the dour Scot bade him farewell, saying, “’Tis a shame you came all this way, and did not get to see the house of John Knox. “

The businessman asked, “Who in the blazes is this John Knox?”

To which the Scotsman replied, “Hoot, mon, dinna ye read your Bible at all?”

Well, that’s a little taste of Scottish humor, told to me nearly forty years ago when I saw the house of John Knox, when I saw his statues in both Edinburgh and Geneva, and stood in the pulpit from which he preached to the English speaking congregation in Geneva when Protestants were exiled and Roman Catholicism established as the faith of the realm in England and Scotland.

John Knox was born in Scotland, and he learned the theology and polity that are reformed and Presbyterian from John Calvin himself in Geneva. A preacher, a prisoner, a galley slave, a royal chaplain, a husband (twice), a father to two sets of children, John Knox was actually ordained in the Church of England, but as he developed the order of service which Presbyterians still use, he parted ways with the Anglican tradition and its adherence to a liturgy based on the Roman Catholic Mass. Indeed, Knox caused the Mass to be outlawed in Scotland for a number of years.

It was written of him, "Knox was notable not so much for the overthrow of Roman Catholicism, but for assuring the replacement of (it) with Presbyterianism rather than Anglicanism. It was thanks to Knox that Presbyterian Polity was established. In that regard, Knox is considered the founder of the Presbyterian denomination, whose members number millions world-wide."

So today, as we celebrate our Presbyterian heritage, we remember the one born five hundred years ago, whose heritage is ours, and whose legacy we are.

Within half a century of the death of John Knox, adherents to the Presbyterian form of government, confessing their faith with the Scots Confession and reading from their King James Bibles began to cross the Atlantic, and many of those wild and wily Scots settled in what is now Pennsylvania, and particularly in the Carolinas and Virginia. They also brought their taste for whiskey with them, but that is another story.

A disproportionate number of leaders both in those early colonies and in the nation that emerged were Presbyterians and that continues to the present day. Though we Presbyterians make up less than 2% of our nation's population, thirteen of the one hundred members of the United States Senate are Presbyterians, as well as many members of the House of Representatives.

In the history of our nation, many of our Presidents have been Presbyterian, or influenced by the Presbyterian and Reformed Faith. The first was Andrew Jackson, who joined First Presbyterian Church of Nashville, Tennessee, shortly after he left the White House, and was instrumental in founding both Hermitage and Old Hickory Presbyterian Churches near his home, known as the Hermitage. His successor, Martin Van Buren, was of the Dutch Reformed faith, our theological first cousins.

James K. Polk, though nominally a Methodist, attended the Presbyterian Church with his wife. James Buchanan attended and supported many churches during his life, but settled on the Presbyterian Church after he left the presidency.

While Abraham Lincoln famously worshiped in the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and his pew is still marked there, and his ghost said to prowl the hallways of the old building, he was never a member there, though the story has been told that he intended to be baptized and join the church on Easter Sunday, but of course, he was assassinated on Good Friday.

Ulysses S. Grant attended both Presbyterian and Methodist churches, but never seemed to join either.

Rutherford Hayes was raised a Presbyterian, but attended Methodist schools and went to church with his Methodist wife.

For the dozen years covered by the two presidencies of Grover Cleveland with Benjamin Harrison sandwiched in between, the White House was occupied by a Presbyterian.

Theodore Roosevelt came from a Dutch Reformed family, but the greatest religious influence in his life was his grandmother, with whom he spent his childhood summers. She was a blue-stocking South Carolina Presbyterian, who taught him not only the Bible but the Westminster Shorter Catechism. I would be remiss not to note that part of TR's legacy is our national park system, including Yellowstone, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, and so much more.

Not only was Woodrow Wilson a Presbyterian, his father was a Presbyterian minister, and a professor of Reformed theology. As Lincoln guided the nation through the Civil War, Wilson guided the nation through World War I, and brought a sense of morality and civility to the presidency.

Perhaps the most notable of Presbyterian presidents was Dwight David Eisenhower, who was baptized and received as a member of the Presbyterian Church shortly after his inauguration as President. The greatest era of growth and new church development in the history of the Presbyterian Church was during Eisenhower's two terms of office, and during that time, the phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge to the Flag, In God We Trust was formally adopted as our nation's motto, and was added to the printed currency of our country as well.

Ronald Reagan worshipped in the Bel-Air Presbyterian church in California for many years, before joining after he left the White House.

Theirs is our Presbyterian Heritage; we who live in this free land, who will two years from now elect a new President, are their legacy. And I ask that we be bold enough to pray that God will raise up a candidate like our Presbyterian Presidents, that we can support and elect two years from now, to lead our nation back to its heritage. That will truly be a legacy to be left behind.

It seems as though in every generation in the history of this nation, God has raised up a Presbyterian to lead the nation, and we Presbyterians have blessed this nation with our leadership and our service.

May God grant us the wisdom and the courage to follow in the footsteps of John Knox, who was not afraid to speak of his faith to Queens and Princes and Kings.

And to God be the glory, the power, the dominion, and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more, amen.