

“What ‘Heritage’ Are You Leaving?”
Acts 11:1-4a, 11-18; John 13:33-35

Chan Willis – F.P.C.-L.C./Welsh
May 26, 2019 – Pres. Heritage Sun.

Every year, many of our fellow Presbyterians celebrate Heritage Sunday, a day to reflect upon and learn more about the long and rich history of the Presbyterian Church in America. It always falls on the Sunday closest to **May 21**, the opening date of the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in **1789**. Leave it to us Presbyterians to pick a date connected with what is, in essence, a much glorified **committee meeting!** OK, it is a *little* bit more significant than that... Maybe the granddaddy of all Session meetings? Regardless of the date, though, I do agree with its **importance**. That there is much to celebrate about the history of our denomination. And that, as it is with any organization, if someone calls themselves a ‘member’ of it, they should have enough pride in it (yes, I said ‘pride’) to know more about its’ **heritage**. It’s past *triumphs*... as well as its past *trials*. After all, we must never forget the truth of that saying (George Santayana/Edmund Burke), that *“Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.”* (and its *mistakes!*)

You will probably be relieved to know that we will NOT, however, be devoting a lot of time in this message to a history lesson. (Can I get an ‘amen’ Charlie/George?) Let’s suffice it to say that aside from Martin Luther getting this whole ‘Reformation revolution’ started in 1517, we owe a lot of our foundation of faith to a bunch of ‘JOHN’s’ (other than ‘Witherspoon’): primarily John Calvin and John Knox... the latter of whom got together in **1560** with 5 other guys named ‘John’ (no, REALLY!) and wrote a ‘contemporary’ statement of faith based on the teachings of that former ‘John.’ **The Scots Confession**. The really amazing thing about their work? They wrote it in FOUR days. Heck, it takes us THAT long just to get a meeting *scheduled*... let alone produce a 25 chapter theological statement! It would remain the official Confession of Faith of the Church of Scotland until superceded by the Westminster Confession of Faith nearly 90 years later, in 1647.

The importance of such guiding documents to what we believe... that is, our Presbyterian **doctrine**... is why one of our denomination’s characteristics is being **Confessional**. Our faith is not merely out of an oral tradition, but a written one. Beliefs that are documented, and articulated. But ALWAYS subject to another bedrock principle: The **Authority of Scripture**.

The Confessions of our Christian faith are always subservient to **the Word...** the Word *Written* (the **Bible**) and ultimately, the **Lordship of Christ**, the Word *Incarnate* (**Jesus**).

As we consider how this historic Christian faith has been handed down to us by the generations before us, we must in turn give thought to how that faith is being passed along to future generations. It will not be through committee or Session meetings, or General Assemblies. It will not come through how many theological statements or books we read... though they can clarify and help inspire that faith. It's not enough for us to know Jesus... we must show Jesus. From our heart and mind... to our hands and feet... with our eyes, and on our lips. We must not forget that contained within the word 'believe' are the letters for the words 'BE' & 'LIVE.'

So, what does this passage in Acts tell us about how to 'BE' a Christian... to 'LIVE' as a follower of Christ? I'm not sure that we have a very good example from the Jewish Christians in the first few verses. We read that ***"the apostles and believers...heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God."*** And that ***"When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"*** (Acts 11:1-3)

Now when we read about such impassioned distinctions between Jew and Gentile, it might be a little hard for us to relate. But what is 'Gentile' anyway? Well, most fundamentally, a NON-Jew. The word comes from the Latin '*gens*,' which means "clan, tribe, family... i.e. **people.**" Anyone who is DIFFERENT. For us today, this distinction would be between us and someone of a different gender, ethnicity, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, religion (or NON-religion), political party (OUCH!). (In this last one, I had to laugh when I came across the ESV Bible translation for "circumcised believers"... the 'circumcision party.' A predecessor to the 'Democratic' and 'Republican' party?

My point is that we ALL can be hesitant to engage someone in ANY type of discussion or interaction because of their being DIFFERENT. Particularly if we find that 'difference' intimidating or objectionable. Remember after 9/11 when you would be on a plane and someone of Middle-Eastern descent would walk down the aisle? And a 'kind of hush' would fall

over the whole cabin? I'll bet not too many people engaged them when they sat down in the seat next to them... even if you happened to be an 'evangelical Protestant'...

And Look, I completely understand our human nature to gravitate to those we share things in common with. And that's FINE. But we must not LIMIT ourselves to always being with people JUST like us. If we are to do more than just 'believe' in Jesus... but try to 'BE' and 'LIVE' like Him... then we might want to heed his words: ***"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*** (John 13:35) Jesus doesn't say 'if you have love for those who are just like you.' NO, Jesus says that just as HE has loved US... warts and all, with all the ways that WE are different from HIM... just as He loved tax collectors, prostitutes, beggars, and lepers...we are to love others. And that by this **unconditional love, "everyone will know that we are (His) disciples."** Particularly those whom we find it hardest to love... who can sometimes actually share a direct 'family lineage' with us...

So what *else* can we in this CHURCH family learn from these 'acts' of Peter in the early faith community... particularly as it relates to how we are to 'show the love' to 'EVERYONE?' Well for one, let's take note of what those 'legalistic' Jews criticized first in Peter's actions. ***"Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"*** (Acts 11:3) To sit down at a meal with a Gentile was *taboo* in the Jewish community. People would talk! (not to mention the priest...) Sharing a dinner with someone was a BIG DEAL! *And it still IS!* We all know pretty well the importance of 'table fellowship'... heck, it's one of our favorite pastimes here in the South! But it is in those more quiet, individual times at a meal with someone... particularly someone who is going through struggles, and could use a faithful person like you to talk to... where our 'religious rubber' meets the road! I challenge you all, This afternoon give some thought to someone God is putting on your heart to 'share at table' with...

And speaking of being open to God's leading, be ready for when that person is NOT whom you would have necessarily chosen on your own. When those three men presented themselves to Peter with a 'ministry opportunity,' how did he respond? He says that ***"The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between 'them and us.'"*** (Acts 11:12) (Hmm... 'them and us.' Is that a phrase that sounds familiar? Often used with the word 'mentality?') No matter how 'different' or 'inconvenient' these people's request was, the Spirit

'noodged' Peter to ***"not make a distinction"***... or, in the NIV, ***"not to hesitate."*** Be OPEN to the Spirit's leading... NOT to hesitate... to engage others in what might be the 'opportunity of a lifetime'. Someone else's 'lifetime,' that is...

It didn't hurt matters that these three guys related how a messenger from God had told their friend that Peter would ***"give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved."*** (Acts 11:14) This was a powerful indicator of the gravity of this 'calling' by a perfect stranger. Like Peter, you too are given a message so that entire households might be saved. The same message that I pray has saved your own...

And then perhaps my favorite quote from the passage. After sharing that message of **salvation**, and witnessing the moving of God's Holy Spirit in that 'entire household,' Peter said that ***"If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when WE believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"*** (Acts 11:17) Or in the words of another translation, ***"Who was I that I could stand in God's way?"*** God wants ALL of His creation to hear that saving message... and WE are the 'conduit' OF that message. We have words of LIFE to those who are dying! In further words of Peter in one of his letters, he says that ***"he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."*** (1 Peter 3:9) To that end, who are we to 'hinder God'... to 'stand in His way'...

As you and I consider the ways that might be 'standing in the way' of God's work... and how we are to be used IN that work... I want to leave you with these words of a document that outline the 'steps' that we are called to make in fulfilling God's Great Commission to our lives. It says that *"God sends the church in the power of the Holy Spirit:*

To announce the good news that in Christ the world is reconciled to God...

To tell all nations and peoples of Christ's call to repentance, faith, obedience

To proclaim in word and deed that Jesus gave himself to set people free...

To offer in Christ's name fullness of life now and forever...

To call people everywhere to believe in & follow Jesus Christ as Lord, Savior

To invite them into the comm. Of faith to worship & serve the triune God...

And the **source** of this great fount of wisdom on our calling as Christians? None other than our "Book of Order." Or 'BOO' for short. That sometimes 'scary,' oft-times dry and

legalistic 'manual of operations' on how to do things in the Pres. Church per our 'mantra'— "decently and in good order." One that's been around as long as some of our confessions. May we find in these words the same sort of truth that Peter stood for... that by the power of God's Holy Spirit, we, the Presbyterian church of Jesus Christ, might indeed live by those action verbs: *"announce... tell... proclaim... offer... call... invite others into THIS community of faith to worship and serve God!"* Let us not 'stand in God's way'... but LIVE in His way... and SHOW the way... On this day in which we celebrate our past, let us look toward the future. Let us give prayerful thought to how we are passing along a Godly legacy to the next generations... ones that don't necessarily 'look,' or 'think,' like we do. In this present time, I leave you with that forward-looking question: **"What Heritage are You Leaving?"**

CHARGE/BENE

You may have known that the name of our processional by that dynamic duo of father and son, the Deans, is entitled *"Highland Cathedral."* What you likely did NOT know is that there are lyrics to this piece of Scottish music. One of the verses goes like this:

"Gone is the past, let us start anew. Let this hope of peace, always remain. Spirit of Scotia, be strong and true. Then your children will smile again..."

I invite you to repeat these words with me, but substitute the name **"Christ"** for 'Scotia'. [REPEAT] May these words of our ancient Scottish heritage also apply to the Christian heritage we pass along to the generations to come...