



Sermons from
First Presbyterian Church

“The Whole Family”

The Rev. Dr. Fairfax F. Fair

January 29, 2012

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 15:1-6

Acts 10:34-43

My parents still tell the story of taking my older brother and me from Arkansas to the New York World’s Fair when we were young children. It was a huge gathering of people. We went during the second summer, and the lines were long. In one of those lines – which seemed to move imperceptibly – my mother noticed someone standing near us in the serpentine coil who was pointing at my brother and me. Then she heard the man say to his companion, “Listen! Even the little ones talk like that!”

Katie Geneva Cannon was the first African-American woman to be ordained in the United Presbyterian Church. Growing up in an eastern North Carolina mill town, Katie’s mother made sure that her daughter was a stalwart member of her local church, there virtually every time the doors were open. Katie tells the story of being a teen and attending a Presbytery youth event. She says, “I got there and my first thought was, ‘What are all these white people doing here?’ Until then, I had never known there were white Presbyterians!”

A number of First Pres members went into Detroit two weeks ago to see the “Faces of Jesus” exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Art. The exhibit is built around a series of groundbreaking portraits of Jesus painted in the Sixteenth Century by Rembrandt and his students. Why are they groundbreaking? Because the artist dares to paint Jesus as a Jew.

Until we are disabused of the notion, we humans picture others as being like ourselves. Despite his Middle Eastern heritage, many a blue-eyed Jesus has adorned the walls of Sunday School classrooms around our country. A part of this tendency – to assume that others are like we are -- is our natural gravitation toward that which is known and familiar. The old cliché, “Birds of a feather flock together” continues to be borne out by children in lunchrooms and by dinner guests in our own homes. But the whole family of God is far more diverse – far less homogenous – than most of us realize or appreciate. The mid-Twentieth Century folk singers who taught us that God’s “got the whole world in his hands” were theologically correct. Yet too often we try to deny that and want instead to impose a hierarchy where there is none. All of us -- in our infinite variety – are created by the same God who loves us equally. This truth is present and affirmed from the beginnings of our faith story.

At the start of the biblical record, God enters into a covenantal relationship with Abraham. From that time forward, God can be counted on to bless Abraham in particular ways, including blessing all the families of the earth through him. Abraham accepts God at his word; Abraham accepts God's covenant and goes forth in faithful obedience. But time passes – and Abraham's wife, Sarah, remains barren. Abraham challenges God, and God leads him out under the brilliant, bright evening sky and says, "Look. Count the stars. So numerous shall your descendants be."

And so we are, the numerous children of the world, black and yellow, red and white, all are precious in God's sight, and all children of God, children of Abraham.

Yet we human beings, being who we are, have nevertheless divided ourselves up again and again in the intervening centuries. We have chosen up sides, beaten one another down, and created divisions where none needed to exist. In our insecurity we have acted as if being loved equally by our life-giving God were not enough, as if one had to be better than another and given the seat of honor at the heavenly banquet rather than rejoicing that one and all are given the family name – children of God – and that each is valued for his or her unique individuality.

The apostles of the First Century church immediately run into questions of who is in and who is out. The more legitimate question is who are we to presume to limit God's love?

The apostles first assume that Jews like themselves are those whom God favors (their assumption being the equivalent of our blue-eyed Jesuses). But then light – truth – begins to dawn. Peter quotes the prophet Joel from some 400 or so years before: "God declares, 'I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh'" (Acts 2:17), and Peter tells everyone who will listen, "The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls" (Acts 2:39).

Not much time passes before Philip preaches to an Ethiopian court official. After hearing the good news of Jesus Christ, the foreigner asks to be baptized. Then an officer of the occupying Roman army, Cornelius, a devout, God-fearing man, presents himself to Peter. The once-prejudiced-against-Gentiles apostle says, "[Now] I truly understand that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34) and Peter issues orders that all Gentiles be welcomed with the waters of baptism.

The God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Peter and Cornelius, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is God of all – and with God there are no distinctions in the worth of human beings.

This afternoon our sanctuary will be filled with the sounds of bagpipes and the colorful tartans of numerous Scottish clans. The service will include a time for tartans to be brought forward for blessing, a tradition romantically but not factually linked to the Act of Proscription, an Eighteenth Century prohibition against Highlanders of Scotland

wearing kilts and other garments in a family's (or a region's) colors. (Imagine Lansing outlawing the wearing of Maize and Blue.)

Ostensibly, a Kirkin' O' the Tartan service honors the Scottish roots of the North American Presbyterian Church, but the actual origin of the Kirkin' service is much more recent. It dates to the spring of 1941 – before the bombing of Pearl Harbor which drew the United States into World War II, but eighteen months after the first battle of the air war over Great Britain, which more specifically took place over Scotland. The cities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Dundee all were heavily bombed, and thousands of civilians were killed.

Scottish-born Peter Marshall, then the pastor of Washington D.C.'s New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, preached a sermon in April 1941 entitled, 'The Kirkin' O' the Tartan.' He wanted to call attention to the plight of churches in Scotland and to collect a special relief offering for them. Marshall's intent was to stir feelings of solidarity with brothers and sisters in Christ across the Atlantic.

Over the years, some people have spoken against Kirkin' services. "I'm not Scottish" they say, "so I feel left out." But the focus of a Kirkin' service is the opposite of exclusiveness. It is about laying down weapons; the laying down of a ceremonial sword will begin this afternoon's service. A Kirkin' is about setting aside differences to worship the God of all. A Kirkin' acknowledges that we come from different places and have different stories, and it points to the kinship we have in Jesus Christ, the hope we have in a God who shows no partiality to one clan or another, to one nationality or ethnic group or another, and to the unity which the Holy Spirit works among us. A Kirkin' is a special celebration of our oneness as children of God, a truth we should celebrate each time we gather to worship.

There is no doubt but that our nation and our world cry out for harmony. Tensions are rising around the Straits of Hormuz. Troops and Taliban and innocents continue to die in Afghanistan. Violence is increasing in Syria. Civility is sadly missing from our presidential primaries, and it stands to reason that the primaries are a foretaste of the general election to come. Latent and blatant racism surround us. There is no doubt but that our nation and our world cry out for harmony.

We – as individuals and as a congregation -- need to do more than we will do this afternoon, celebrate unity. We need to put our best efforts toward creating it. We need to mirror in our own lives what the first apostles learned and taught – that God shows no partiality – and neither can we as disciples of Jesus Christ.

When slurs are heard, we must speak up! When disrespect is shown, we must stand up! When injustice is meted out, we must meet it with the demand for justice. Not to do so is to abdicate the responsibility we have as members of the household of God.

A document in our Presbyterian Book of Confession is the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*. One of its authors is Martin Niemoller. He is famous for saying,

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out --
because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out --
because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out --
because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me --
and there was no one left to speak for me.

Friends, our need to lay down arms and pray for the well being of all is not about self interest. It is about reverence for God and God's creation, the whole family of God. We are more alike than different, but sometimes our eyes must be opened to see it. No matter how we look or sound, we share the image of God. We share God's covenant, God's promise -- first made to Abraham, now given for us all, for God's whole family.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.

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