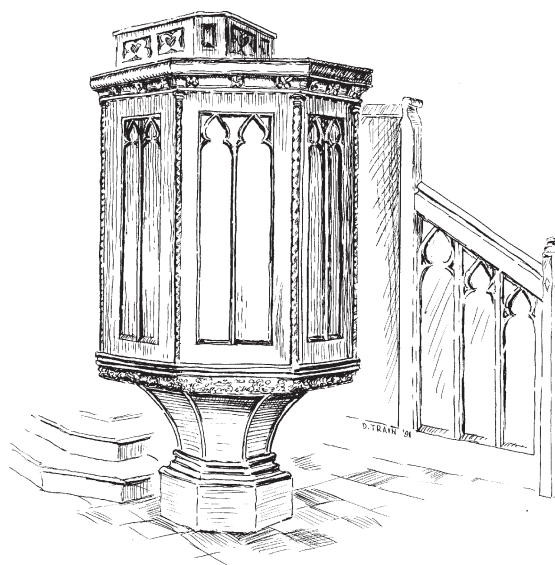


February 24, 2008

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Making Room (3) Hospitality and the Foreigner by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Leviticus 19:34

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” That passage from Deuteronomy is one of my absolute favorites. The Jewish people have the enviable ability to relive their history. They are taught at an early age to take a personal role in their heritage. “My ancestor,” they say; “The Egyptians treated us harshly.” They say, “We cried to Yahweh the God of our fathers and Yahweh heard our voice, saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression...he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” Isn’t that amazing – us, we, our? – 14 times in just five verses. When’s the last time you heard a youngster say, “I was there at Plymouth Rock” or “We nearly froze to death that winter in Gettysburg?”

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” That the Israelites were once themselves aliens in Egypt is made a central reason for adopting laws and practices that offered help and compassion to all such marginalized members of the community. Israel’s experience of oppression was to serve as a warning that those who were aliens could easily be victimized.

Leviticus, the law book, makes it plain in our second reading this morning - a passage I mentioned in last week’s sermon. “When a foreigner lives with you in your land, don’t take advantage of him. Treat the foreigner the same as the native. Love him as one of your own. Remember you were once foreigners

in Egypt. I am God, your God.”

Several of you this week at Westminster Academy, and in other conversation too, wanted to discuss that passage further as it relates to our current situation in the United States - the controversy over undocumented workers that's one of the volatile issues in the current presidential campaign. I know that no matter what I say on this topic, I run the risk of alienating some of you. Not a smart move on the day changes in call are to be approved. Without getting partisan, I think it's worth the risk. We could all use a little review of what the Bible has to say about aliens in our midst.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” Who were your ancestors in this melting pot we call America? A wandering Scot was my ancestor. He was one of those 18th Century Scottish dissenters who sought religious freedom. Neither the Aramean nor the Scot would live in slavery. Both sought to worship God in freedom.

And so, John McConnell, with his wife Elizabeth and five children sailed to America from Dumfriesshire, Scotland in 1723. John and Elizabeth settled on a farm of about 600 acres in what was then Chester County and is now called Lancaster County in Pennsylvania. John and Elizabeth were people of faith who named their children with strong biblical names – Alexander, John, Daniel and Martha. The father died in 1754. In his will dated September 23 of that year, he begins this way: “In the name of God Amen” and on stating he is of sound mind adds, “Thanks be to God.” Later he gives thanks for “such worldly goods as hath pleased God to bless me with...”

“Beloved son, Alexander” makes out best in the will. At least it appears that Alexander gets the best piece of property. It was this same Alexander who had a Bible inscribed, “Alexander McConnell his Holy Bible he bought it in ye year of our Lord, 1764.” In this Bible he and his progeny kept the family record.

Well, who cares? I care. When I sing “Faith of Our Fathers,” I’m singing about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but I’m also singing about John McConnell and Alexander and his son James the “steamboat builder, carpenter, and draftsman.”

You see a wandering Scot was my father, and he decided to leave Scotland so that he might worship according to his conscience. His first priority was religious freedom, and so he made his way across the Atlantic to Penn’s woods – to clear 600 acres in Lancaster County – to help found an Associate Presbyterian (or Seceder) Church.

Did my wandering Scot compare himself and the people who crossed the sea with him with the children of Israel going into the wilderness? You bet he did. How strong a faith our fathers and mothers had! They were not willing to serve other gods. They didn’t rationalize that they were better off staying in a situation that did not allow them to worship as their consciences saw fit. They lived in faith and they lived in hope.

We are a nation of immigrants. I look out at you and realize you all have your own stories of ancestors: Irish folks who came here to escape the potato famine, Africans brought here as slaves, Germans, Yugoslavians, Italians, Koreans, Japanese, Colombians, Chinese, Mexicans, Belgians. Surely, we are a nation of immigrants. If any nation could sympathize with the plight of the alien in its midst, it should be we Americans - all of us were aliens ourselves once. Even if we can’t quite relate to the Israelite proclamation that our ancestor was a wandering Aramean of 4,000 years ago, surely we can relate to our ancestors coming to the New World a couple of decades or a couple of centuries ago.

Whatever happened to "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

The American dream happened; 9/11 happened; the 21st century standard of living in America happened; the Internet happened; mass media happened. Suddenly thousands and thousands want to join our melting pot and it's a little frightening, isn't it? Hundreds a day swimming across the Rio Grande.

Well, we may be a nation of immigrants, but we are also a nation of laws and it's the laws governing foreigners coming to America that seem of paramount importance to many of us now.

How do we balance it? Hospitality, kindness to the foreigner, compassion for the poor, empathy with the alien balanced against law, order, security, keeping our slice of the American dream, playing it safe. It's a difficult balancing act, isn't it?

Perhaps it is instructive to see how Jesus balanced law and compassion. You remember, don't you - healing the sick on the Sabbath, forgiving sinners, feeding the hungry on the Sabbath, whenever caring for the oppressed came against the law and playing it safe, Jesus always erred on the side of love over order. Always.

There are more than a few popular myths about immigrants these days. Like the **myth that immigrants don't pay taxes**. Immigrants pay taxes, in the form of income tax, property tax, sales tax - all kinds of taxes. Even undocumented immigrants pay income taxes as evidenced by the Social Security Administration's "suspense file" (taxes that cannot be matched to workers' names and Social Security numbers), which grew by \$20 billion between 1990 and 1998.

Myth: Immigrants come here to take welfare. The ratio between immigrant use of public benefits and the amount of taxes they pay is consistently favorable to the U.S. In one estimate, immigrant tax payments total \$20 to \$30 billion more than the amount of government services they use.

Myth: Immigrants take jobs and opportunity away from Americans. The largest wave of immigration to the U.S. since the early 1900s coincided with the lowest national unemployment rate and fastest economic growth.

Myth: Immigrants are a drain on the U. S. economy. The net benefit of immigration to the U.S. is nearly \$10 billion annually.

Myth: Most immigrants cross the border illegally. Around 75 percent of today's immigrants have legal permanent (immigrant) visas; of the 25 percent that are undocumented, 40 percent overstayed temporary (non-immigrant) visas. ("Sojourners" July 2006)

I recall the summer between my junior and senior year of college. Our nuclear family took our last vacation together just the four of us - a vacation to the British Isles. My brother had recently returned from Viet Nam - soon to be off to law school. My dad had gotten into investigating our family tree. We visited Dumfriesshire, Scotland where John & Elizabeth set out for America in 1723 and the Isle of Skye where the family had lived for centuries before.

But we started our trip in London. On the second evening in that grand city we had dinner at an authentic English pub in a working neighborhood of London. Someone had given us a tip that this was

the real thing if you wanted to experience a pub. And it was. The food was simple, but tasty. Cider and ale on tap. We were having just a great time, when suddenly I realized that all those crusty English guys were looking at us funny and talking about us. "What do those Americans think they're doing in our pub? Why couldn't they stay home? Look at how they dress - amazing." Thinking about it four decades later, I still have strong feelings - anger, disappointment, rejection.

It helps - just a little - in imagining how a homeless, hungry Mexican family feels looking for a job here in Dayton.

Let us pray -

O Lord, our Lord, you are a God of compassion. Help us to overcome our fears and show compassion, hospitality and love to the aliens in our midst.