



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## God and Countries

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ FEBRUARY 4, 2024

### SCRIPTURE | **Philippians 2:5-11**

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

- <sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be  
used to his own advantage;  
<sup>7</sup>rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!  
<sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup>and every tongue acknowledge that **Jesus Christ is Lord**,  
to the glory of God the Father.

### **The Impact of a Good Translator**

It was a year or so after the ceasefire that ended the hot war on the Korean peninsula. South Koreans, their country and economy shattered by conflict, were trying to rebuild. Presbyterian missionaries to

the country found many people were open to a spiritual renewal. The mission invited a prominent American theologian and professor from Princeton Seminary to come to their country to preach the gospel. A bilingual Korean pastor volunteered to travel with him and serve as translator. The professor decided to give a lecture that had been well received on campus by his graduate students.

When the renowned scholar arrived at a village that had been war-battered, the simple farmers and tradesmen of the community and their families were invited to come together to hear about this faith that could impact them in a deeper way than the traditional Buddhism of their ancestors. When the crowd had gathered and the American was introduced, he began his remarks with this sentence: “In our approach to understanding existential reality, we may proceed either inductively or deductively.” The Korean pastor paused for a moment, and then in Korean said, “I am here to tell you about what Jesus Christ means to me.”

The speech continued for another 20 minutes in this vein. At the end, many Koreans in the audience expressed interest in learning more about the Bible. As he received applause, the American professor was gratified that his brilliant remarks—which had so impressed his seminary students at Princeton—were also well-received by the Koreans. He had no idea that what he said was not what they heard.

Sometimes people in my profession make blunders like that. We try to show off to our listeners the erudite learning and impressive vocabulary we have accumulated by years of study. But we fail to speak plainly or show what the Biblical message means for real people.

### **The Simple Truth**

In the next few minutes, I will be sharing with you some things about history and theology, but I want to make sure that the basic message isn’t lost in the details or muddled by my inadequacies. So **here** is what I hope you will understand and take home.



**If you desire to grow  
as a follower or disciple of Jesus,  
you need to learn how to include God  
in every area of your life.**



He is not to be limited to an hour at church each weekend, nor a few minutes of prayer in your morning or evening. He wants to be your Partner through all of life. You can include Him and His wise teachings and guidance in your home life and marriage, your job, your friendships, the way you use your money and your time, the way you think about politics, and the way you treat your neighbor. God will be not only your Savior but your Lord—and your life will go better the more you include Him in every dimension.

### **The Origin of the Tradition**

Now let me explain the background and the significance of the rituals and traditions we have been celebrating in this annual “Kirkin’ of the Tartan” ceremony. It was first instituted in America in 1943, developed by a native Scotsman named Rev. Peter Marshall, who moved to America in his 20s to attend seminary and then become a pastor. In 1937, at the tender age of 35, he was called to pastor the high-profile New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C.—not far from the Capitol and White House. Soon after, he was also invited to serve as the Chaplain of the United States Senate, and his messages, prayers and individual counsel had a strong impact upon the nation’s leaders in the midst of the darkest days of the Second World War.

Marshall, a remarkably gifted speaker and writer, discovered a way to not only reflect a nostalgic love for his homeland but also to remind Americans of the values and principles brought to this country by Scottish immigrants that became embedded in our nation. In addi-

tion to the pageantry of bagpipes, kilts, and tartan flags he designed the heritage worship service around a recreation of the “Kirkin’ of the Tartan”; literally, the presentation before God in a worship service of the regalia associated with Scottish clans of the Highlands. Word-of-mouth enthusiasm for this annual celebration spread, and by 1954 it was being held at the beautiful and massive National Cathedral. Churches across the country (not just Presbyterian) re-enact the pageantry—including our church every winter.

### **Scotland: A Country Divided**

The country of Scotland has been for half a millennium part of the United Kingdom but with very unique traditions (it’s rightly been noted that Scotland is “British but not English”). Scotland was separated into two very different cultures. The Lowlands area (including the major cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and the Borders region next to England) has for centuries been much more European and more highly educated. It was in this region that the Scottish Reformation, led by John Knox in the late 1500s, dramatically flourished. Nearly all Roman Catholic churches in the Lowlands became Presbyterian “Kirks” or churches. The Highlands of Scotland (which also includes the islands west and north of the mainland) were a different culture and dialect. Life was more rural, more isolated from European culture, and was dominated by the rival clans. These clans were often at war with one another (over land, livestock, and who would be the dominant chief or warlord) and were, at times, rebellious to the national Scottish government headquartered in the Lowlands (as well as the despised English king in London).

In the 1800s a Lowland Scottish writer named Sir Walter Scott studied the mostly unwritten oral legends of the Highlands and wrote a number of historical novels, romanticizing the Highlanders (his best-sellers include *Rob Roy*, *Ivanhoe*, *Waverly*, and *The Heart of Midlothian*). English and American readers became fascinated by this vanishing culture of the clans. Just as American television and movies in the 1950s and 60s were obsessed with tales of the frontier American west

of the century before (think John Wayne, *Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, and *The Lone Ranger*), so European and American imaginations were captivated by romantic and thrilling stories of the Highlands. Have you ever seen the play or film *Brigadoon*? Woolen mills and marketers in Lowland Scotland began to develop and widely sell the vast variety of colorful tartans, and tourists snapped them up.

### **What was Marshall's Message?**

Peter Marshall was a Lowland Scot who had heard the legends of the Highlands. The “Kirkin’ of the Tartan” he developed does not fit exactly with any documented or historical records, and Peter died suddenly of a heart attack in 1949 (at the age of 46), having never written down his sources or his purpose. Speculation has abounded about what the custom was meant to communicate. Some have argued that it had no spiritual significance and was just an opportunity to play bagpipes and wear kilts in church to satisfy Marshall’s love of his homeland. Others claim that it harkens back to conflicts in the 1700s between the Highlanders and the Lowlanders (who were allied with the English government). But I think I’ve figured out what Peter Marshall was really trying to say to the American church, and that is what I will explain.

The life of people in the Highlands of Scotland was built on loyalty and patriotism to a person’s clan and family—reflected in their unique tartans (which were like their team uniforms). That kind of affection and devotion is a normal part of humanity. It is natural for us to be dedicated to our land, our people. We love our community, we love our alma mater, we passionately support our preferred sports teams and wear their colors. We salute and pledge allegiance to our flag. Patriotism and other forms of loyalty can be a great virtue. But, as with every virtue, it can be twisted by sin into a vice if it’s taken too far or elevated above every other virtue.

C.S. Lewis affirms the natural love we feel for people like us in his book *The Four Loves*. But he warns about patriotism or loyalty that

becomes toxic. In Lewis's own time, he simply looked across the North Sea to the evil hyper-partisanship that Hitler whipped up in Germany. Love for their Aryan race led them to kill Jews (who were not of their clan) and to try to conquer the world. How many other times have we seen this in history? In biblical times the Jews hated the Samaritans, and vice versa, and everybody hated the Romans. Thirty years ago in Rwanda, the Hutus hated the Tutsis and tried to exterminate them. Vladimir Putin has tried to inflame a hatred among Russians of their neighbors the Ukrainians. Political parties in our own country treat the other party as the enemy. We've experienced race riots, one ethnic group attacking another (White supremacists and Black radicals alike have stained our history).

### **A Higher Loyalty**

What is the answer to all these competing loyalties that alienate us from one another and pull us apart? The only answer is to lift our eyes to a higher loyalty. It is God alone who deserves our ultimate worship and devotion. Every human institution—even the family, the community, the clan, and the nation—is subordinate to Him. And it is only when we worship the true God that the false idols of human institutions take their proper place.

The experience Peter Marshall created for his congregation, using the distant trappings of the Scottish Highlands, was meant to demonstrate that all the different clans—no matter how much they disliked and were in competition with one another—needed to come together in the Kirk, the church, where their individual human differences would be laid before God. The only unity to be found by the warring clans was in a mutual submission to the True and Ultimate King. That, I'm convinced, is the real message of the "Kirkin' of the Tartan."

And now we can see why Peter Marshall wanted his congregation, and later the entire capital city, to see this principle enacted. In the pews of his church every Sunday sat Republicans and Democrats,

who had spent the previous week fighting and slandering and arguing with each other, accusing each other of the worst motives. How can a pastor help his squabbling flock to learn how to put their differences aside and work for a higher goal and a loftier purpose? Watching the pageantry from a previous era across the ocean, as the fighting clans made peace before God and reaffirmed their obedience to Him, the American politicians were challenged to likewise lay aside their partisanship. It was a time to gain an eternal and spiritual perspective on the constantly-changing issues of the day, and also a time to be reminded that love, respect, humility and mutual forbearance of one another were the ways God expected them to treat one another, based on the example and teachings of Jesus.

## **Applications**

To bring this message down to the ground, to where we are right now, let's reflect on these two applications:

- 1) Keep our differences in perspective
- 2) Invite the Lord's presence into each corner of our lives

The first principle refers to our public, corporate and political lives. This year will conclude with an important election, touching our civic life from the national to the local level. We may feel very passionately about the issues of our day, and that's good. We may feel loyal to one party over another. But ever-fluctuating politics are not the most important things. They are temporary; God's purposes and His kingdom are eternal.

We will all one day bow before Him, willingly or unwillingly. You and I can choose to bow to Him now, to lay our personal loyalties and "tartans" before His altar. God is not a D or an R, not a Jew or a Palestinian, not a Russian or a Ukrainian. He is above us all, and He commands us to obey His Word and teachings if we wish to be right with Him. So we, as American Christians, should choose to live out our political lives by seeking to discern and follow God's side.

The second application moves us into the area of our personal lives. It is always appropriate—but perhaps at no time more than this “Kirkin’ of the Tartan” ceremony—to ask God to reveal to us if there are areas of our relationships, our marriage or family life, our job, our habits and activities, that have not been properly laid before Him. Remember, Jesus wants to be our Lord not just for one hour on Sunday morning, but 24 ... 7 ... 365 (and 366 in Leap Year). ■

