Because of those who came before, we are; in spite of their failings, we believe; because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision, we, too, dream.
BARBARA PESCAN

Sermon: *The Religions of Our Past, and Present*

Scotland is a land of churches. It is also a land of hills and glens, lochs and heather, of sheep, and whisky, and the thrilling combination of misty days and twisty roads, where everyone persists in driving on the wrong side. My husband Peter and I were lucky to experience all of this when we visited Scotland for two weeks this summer. You might imagine that two ministers would enjoy a break from religion while on vacation, but I guess ours was a predictable busman's holiday. We spent a good bit of our time visiting all kinds of houses of worship: ancient ruined monasteries, vast city cathedrals, tiny village chapels; old and new (or at least newer), large and small, functioning and long-closed. Of course, most of our days there weren't Sundays, so we couldn't really tell if the congregations attached to those buildings were thriving, or not. Going to church on Sundays has gone quite out of fashion in at least some of the urban areas in Scotland. But there are still many rural areas where the Sabbath is kept very strictly, and absolutely nothing commercial functions on Sundays, not even the buses.

I didn't know much Scottish history beforehand, so learning some of what we didn't know became a daily preoccupation. We bought books, listened carefully to some wonderful tour guides; and we paid attention to what we could see in all those churches: studying the plaques on the walls, noticing gravestones in the churchyard, reading the visitor's brochures set out in the lobby. The story of Christianity in Scotland is complicated, but one theme shows up consistently: "the church" in Scotland is a church divided. During the last several centuries, the Church of Scotland has experienced serious disputes, over issues like the power of bishops, and the authority of congregations to choose their own ministers; disputes over rituals, and stained glass, and saints, and standards of membership. And it appears that every time a conflict occurred, some group would split (or be split) off from another. I gave up trying to remember the differences between the regular Church of Scotland and the Free Presbyterians and the Associated Presbyterians, and the Free Church (continuing)…

The Scots have been practicing religious division for quite a while. One extraordinary example of this is in St. Giles, the grand cathedral in Edinburgh that was John Knox's church, the great Protestant reformer. Built long before the reformation began, it is now beautifully restored (and with a major capital campaign underway, I noticed). But during the sweeping changes of the 16th and 17th centuries, it might not have seemed very beautiful at all: at one point the stained glass windows, the organ, the pews, any and all decorations were removed. In those times, "worship" was free-form, without music, or ritual, focused entirely on preaching. After Knox died, the congregation split over many issues, but they didn't stop coming to church. We were told that at one time forty-seven different congregations met, and worshipped, in different areas in the building. I first had an image of a great cacophony – many different voices raised, competing with each other in volume and inspiration, like the Tower of Babel. But the guide told us that they actually erected walls, so that there were 47 different little churches - sharing the same space, and invisible from one another.

For me, however, the most astounding example of what can happen when a church divides is the St. Nicholas Kirk (Church), in Aberdeen. Built in 12th century, the building is long

and narrow, its ends both united and separated by a central transept. Sometime after the Reformation began, the congregation divided, literally, into two separate churches: one met in nave, the other in the chancel, on either side of the transept. Each "church" became quite distinct: they differ architecturally, and in furnishings, colors, and design, resulting in a very different feeling on each end of the building. People came in the same doors in the center, and then split: some heading east, some west. A few decades ago, the two congregations came back together – the insides of the two halves still look quite different, but a chapel has been built in the transept between them, and the doors are open on both sides. The church is now called "St. Nicholas Uniting." I learned from one of the church ladies I spoke to that some people feel it should have been called St. Nicholas "United;" I guess that others felt that the reintegration was somehow still in process.

I know that there were many reasons for all of these divisions -- some of them political, some probably economic, and some perhaps just habit, since the Scots have long been adept at fighting each other. But for the most part, as I understand it, the fundamental differences were also always ***theological***. I told you last week that "theology is not optional" – none of us gets to opt out of holding some theological viewpoint, which colors everything we see and do. Theology and religion in Scotland are nothing if not abundant, and diverse. There is the oldest reverence for the beautiful, harsh land; an ancient respect for the monastic tradition, centers of great learning and great holiness; and all of it mixed with the fierce loyalty (and perhaps despair) that grew out of centuries of warfare between the Scots and their English neighbors. Religion was *always* a part of those wars – specifically the long battle over whether the Pope in Rome, or the Protestant clerics closer to home, would decide the religion of the land.

It's easier to notice such stories in unfamiliar places, than it is at home. But even though we don't have any 12th century cathedrals, the realities of religious division are just as prominent in our land as in Scotland – in some ways more so. The story of our country, even before it became a nation, has always been a religious one…and it has been a story of division, dispute, and competing ideas, doctrines, and practices, right from the beginning. For more than a century, the Puritans in this Massachusetts Bay Colony had more luck than most in keeping the churches in "their" land on the same theological track: a rather strict, and utopian, version of Calvinism. In case you've forgotten, there were four central tenets of Puritan theology. Our ancestors believed that:

- humanity is utterly dependent on God for salvation
- the Bible is the ultimate authority, in interpreting God's intentions
- God created society as a unified whole
- God works with people through covenants, or sacred agreements, that are divinely ordained

The Puritans were able to maintain this modicum of religious order, but only because there was a "Standing Order" of churches in all Massachusetts towns; governmental officials were able to punish, and even to expel those who did not agree with their ideas, as they did with Roger Williams. In at least one way, I'm grateful to them: because of their efforts to keep Massachusetts pure, "Rhode Island" became a byword for "eccentricity and extremism."[1] We're

[1] *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*.

proud that that tradition lives on. Puritan views did not, however, provide a good foundation for developing the principle of separation of church and state.

And, in the end and even in the beginning, it didn't succeed. There were always those who held, or came to hold, different views. Precisely because the Puritan tradition was in its very origin a ***separatist*** one (meaning those who felt strongly enough about their religious beliefs to "separate" from the Church of England), there was always a possibility, even an obligation, that individuals would remove themselves from that which did not seem true. It was built right into their theology. And ours.

Some of those who thought differently were Baptists. They, too, came out of the English Separatist tradition, and they got their name because they believed that baptism 'in Christ' could be chosen only by adults; it must not be given, or imposed, on an infant. Roger Williams helped to found the first Baptist Church in America, in 1639, in Providence. But he stayed a Baptist for only a few months; thereafter he called himself a "seeker," and joined no church since he did not find one that he felt properly represented true Christianity.

After the Revolution, all things religious became even more heated. Not everyone belonged to a church, to be sure…but that didn't stop those who did from waging what the Rev. David Johnson, late of our Unitarian Universalist church in Brookline, has described as "fiery and momentous warfare… for the soul of the nation and the souls of its people."[2] By that time, there were many religions to choose from. Even in Massachusetts (which David Johnson calls "that land of steady habits") there was a steady increase of Baptists and Methodists, and intense theological competition and controversy. One similarity was that most religions of the time were characterized by "closed" attitudes: most had strict rules for behavior, and an eagerness to identify those who were not welcome to become members – including Calvinist Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Disciples, and Quakers.

It is very hard for us to understand this context. Our expectation, most of us in liberal denominations at any rate, is that everyone has a right to find a religious tradition where they feel at home – and the right not to engage in religion at all, if they so choose. There is something for everyone, or at least there should be; the point is to get along, to work together where possible, and to respect differences. For all of the closemindedness and fear of our time, we in this country are blessed with these assumptions, and reminded to our sorrow that much of the rest of the world does not share them. But we still think that tolerance for difference is right (and wish that the Israelis and the Palestinians, Shia and Sunni, Hindus and Muslims would see the light). Tolerance, in our time, at least in our part of the world, has become downright mainstream.

It was not so for our ancestors. Religious debate in the 18th and 19th centuries was impassioned, essential; it was entertaining for some, and deeply agonizing for others, like Thomas Barnes and his wife, Mary. The Barnes' were not unusual - life was extraordinarily difficult for most early Universalists. Tolerance, in those times, was absolutely *not* a virtue – and Universalism was understood to be so radical a heresy that few were inclined to tolerate it at all. Universalism was seen as a threat to true religion, and a recipe for moral collapse: without the threat of hell, why would anyone be good? One churchman of the time preached against Universalism as "the sum of all villainies;" he counseled good people to "fly from Universalism

[2] David Johnson, "The Soul Destroying Threat of Universalism"

as from the deadly fangs of a serpent."[3] There were economic boycotts against Universalist businesses; Universalists were not allowed to serve on juries; and preachers of other faiths would sometimes show up on Universalists' doorsteps, and attempt to "save" them. All because Universalists believed that God's love has no boundaries, and all of us are loved, and saved.

I would not wish away the progress we have made – progress in opening our minds, in at least beginning to recognize the richness and peace of accepting another's differences. I would not wish away the distance we have come. But I do wish that we might re-discover some of the passion, the depth of *religious* feeling that so filled those who came before us: those who were moved, *by their faith*, to build beautiful sacred houses such as this one; or moved to leave them, in search of some place more true. We are right to care about our theology; we are even more right to speak to one another of what we struggle to know as truth, goodness, justice; and we are always right to listen, as carefully as we can. To do so is a fitting legacy, to honor those who made it possible for us to worship here, and to hand on to our children.

So may it be.

[3] Johnson, ibid.