**Free to be You, Free to be Me** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
1 Corinthians 9:16-23 Saint Paul, Minnesota
February 4, 2024

How many people here this morning have Scottish heritage? How many people are vicariously Scottish just for today?

You may be interested to know that new tests have shown that a scrap of fabric found in a Highland peat bog 40 years ago in Scotland is likely to be the oldest tartan ever discovered.

The Scottish Tartans Authority commissioned dye analysis and radiocarbon testing of the textile to prove its age.

Using high resolution digital microscopy, four initial colors of green, brown, and possibly red and yellow were identified.

The textile was probably created somewhere between 1500 and 1600, making it the oldest known piece of true tartan discovered in Scotland.[[1]](#footnote-1) And a manufacturer and distributor of tartan fabrics has now recreated this 16th century pattern for modern wear.

Ask yourself: What makes a person Scottish? American? Canadian? French? English? German? Swedish? Korean? Japanese? Chinese? Nigerian? South African? Russian? Egyptian, Somali, Mexican? Brazilian?

Is it race, ethnicity, culture, religion, personality, genetics? Or something else?

Another recent story in the news reports on a beauty pageant in Japan. When a model born in the Ukraine was crowned Miss Japan, it sparked controversy and a debate over Japanese identity. The winner has lived in Japan since she was five and is a naturalized citizen. She defends her strong sense of Japanese identity, despite not having Japanese heritage.

One of the most popular TV shows on PBS is *Finding Your Roots,* hosted by Henry Louis Gates. In each episode, celebrities are presented with a "book of life" that is compiled with information researched by professional genealogists (written records) and genetics (DNA testing) that allows them to view their ancestral histories, learn about familial connections and discover secrets about their lineage.

For example, on a recent episode actor and comedian Bob Odenkirk thought his ancestry was primarily Irish Catholic but discovered that he actually descends from a German Duke and is an 11th cousin to King Charles III.

I share this with you because we Americans seem to be on a quest to discover *“who we are”* and the boom in genealogical research is a big part of that.

In fact, a whole new industry has developed under the banner of *Ancestry Travel* which is a response to a surge in people across the globe wanting to find out more about their roots. In pursuit of the places that once defined their family’s lives, travelers are now paying homage to their ancestors and taking pilgrimages to destinations based on their results.

I think this is interesting because there is a theory that our personalities are *fractal,* which is to say, we are different people not only at different stages in our lives but also at the same time in the various social contexts we inhabit.

Obviously, we all have different sides of ourselves that we reveal in part or full or not at all depending on the context. And especially in this age of social media, most people have many, many potential contexts to choose from.

Like Paul boasting to the Corinthian church about being all things to all people, we become a happy family for a Facebook post. Instagram influencers become as one “spontaneously” recommending a product. Twitter (now X) users become political pundits (or sports commentators), throwing up edgy opinions they would never share in the office. All of these expressions add up to curations of identities and discrepancies with the image we have built in other places.

And then there are the identities we acquire just through living in the world. I am in what is called late middle-age, White, cis-gender, heterosexual male. You might be Black, or transgender, an immigrant, or a person with a disability.

These descriptors come together in complex and sometimes complicated ways—and they never completely capture the entirety of a person.[[2]](#footnote-2)

So, let’s consider these things in terms of our text from 1st Corinthians 9 this morning—where Paul is grappling with questions of identity, as well.

Let’s set the scene: About the year AD 50, towards the end of his second missionary journey, Paul founded the church in Corinth (in Greece)—a diverse, wealthy, cosmopolitan city--before moving on to [Ephesus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ephesus), a city on the west coast of today's Turkey, about 180 miles by sea from [Corinth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Corinth). From there he traveled to [Caesarea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesarea_Maritima) and [Antioch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antioch). Paul returned to Ephesus on his third missionary journey and spent approximately three years there.

It was while staying in Ephesus that he received disconcerting news of the community in Corinth regarding jealousies, rivalry, and immoral behavior. It also appears that, based on a letter the Corinthians sent Paul, the congregation was requesting clarification on a number of matters, such as marriage and the consumption of meat previously offered to idols.

And so, when Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians, the young church was experiencing turmoil and competing loyalties. *"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters . . . that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."* In the midst of their ethical and doctrinal problems, says Paul, what was most important was that they love all people. This was their only obligation--the Corinthians needed to know love that knows no boundaries and does not choose sides. *"For though I am free with respect to all,"* Paul wrote, *"I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them."*

There is not a personality crisis here. Paul grew up in cosmopolitan, well-educated settings. He had certainly been around Jews, Greeks, and Romans enough to know how to get along with people of different cultures. His *“becoming as”* feels like a rhetorical flourish. It’s still the same Paul in all the different phases but adapted to his settings.

And though he uses the language of commerce, his reinventions are never simply about making a sale. Where the *“strong”* of Corinth were inflexible and smug in their identities, Paul was willing to become like the people he evangelized so that he could walk with them.

The profit of this enterprise, such as it was, came from the opportunity to share the gospel. Unlike so many evangelists, Paul was not interested in bringing his culture to benighted people. That’s why he was so willing to shed his baggage and adopt other customs. The point was the *message,* not the surface form it came in.

Jesus, for his part, took a different path, as well. He was never a conformist: by the depictions of the gospels, he was who he was all along, never surrendering to the pressure to be someone else, even when tempted. In fact, Jesus seems to have been exceptionally *differentiated.* When the people of Galilee want to box him into his healing ministry, he tells his disciples that it’s time to move on, the better to preserve his calling to preach.

This is important to understand because *modern consumer culture* presents far more opportunities to reinvent oneself than were ever available in the ancient world.

Daniel Schultz put it this way: *“It would only take a few keystrokes to make myself into a tweedy academic. A couple hundred dollars and an hour or two at the local Fleet Farm and I’d fit right in with the working-class camouflage enthusiasts in the area. But there is truth in one of Henri Nouwen’s sayings, that the features most unique to ourselves are in fact those we hold most in common with other people.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

In other words, the surface features of identity are flimsy and easily manipulated. What Paul and Jesus knew was something deeper: that *who we are* is not a matter of the clothes we wear, the music we listen to, or the social media we participate in. Our identities are defined by *who we love*. Phases come and go. So does nonconformity. The real work continues throughout life: to maintain the freedom to love who we need to love, and so become ourselves.

Friends, Christians have often insisted on a single, best-self-identity put on for the community, at the risk of authenticity, at the risk of not being our true selves, at the risk of excluding whole groups of people. But the church could choose otherwise.

If you’ve ever looked at a magnified image of a crystal, you will know that they grow *fractally,* with self-similar pieces coming together to make a larger, beautiful unity. The body of Christ, with its many members, could embrace the totality of the fractals. It could choose to accept all the miniature pieces that make us up: good, bad, and ugly, all the personas and identities and labels.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Ask yourself: What would it look like to gather in the many differences and contradictions of individuals and address their struggle to put them together in a coherent whole?

Maybe it’s our job to help them do that. Food for thought on this 5th Sunday after Epiphany.

1. *Oldest Tartan Found to Date Back to 16th Century,* BBC, March 26th, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Daniel Schultz, *We Are All Like Paul, Boasting to the Corinthian Church About Being All Things to all People,* The Christian Century, February 2, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Daniel Schultz, *The Different People We Are (1 Corinthians 9:16-23),* The Christian Century, February 2, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)