

Plums or Pecans?

May 5, 2013

John 14:23-29

The word “government” conjures up all sorts of thoughts and feelings in most of us. Maybe we think of taxes, or self-serving politicians, or bad legislation, or maybe some even think of the protective and beneficial services offered by governmental agencies.

But I think it’s a safe bet that no one is indifferent to the idea of government.

We do wonder at many of the actions taken by government at all levels – local, state and federal – and often struggle to understand just what is going on, or as some would put it, “what in the world were they thinking.”

Sometimes, though, to our immense surprise, actions taken by governments can offer entirely unintended interpretive possibilities.

I’m thinking of one such act this morning. And it isn’t anything recent, although there are any number of current things that might offer such possibilities.

No, the act I’m thinking of occurred a little over 150 years ago. It is the Homestead Act of 1862.

I think that act provides a great lens for viewing factors of growth and change within the church.

Many people may have a vague recollection of having heard about the Homestead Act in school, but most probably haven’t thought about it much, if at all, since then.

But actually, the Homestead Act was one of the most important pieces of legislation of the 19th century.

It encouraged many hardy individuals to settle in the vast expanses of the great prairie of the American Midwest, promising them the possibility of land ownership.

If they could prove they were over 21 and were head of a household, these pioneers could claim 160 acres from the United States government.

Over a five-year period, the homesteaders were expected to build a house, make improvements, and farm the land of their tract.

At the end of the five years, if they could prove they had met all the government criteria, the homesteaders paid a filing fee of \$18 and were able to claim the land, free and clear.

In this way, immigrants from overseas, former slaves, and many who otherwise would never have owned land were able to establish homes and farms.

Now bear with me just a minute here as we look at the psychology of homesteading. It's really very interesting.

For the first 20 years or so, homesteaders were focused on the need to make the land farmable. They had to clear the seemingly endless stands of tall, waving prairie grass.

And only when they had done this did the settlers begin to think about how they might beautify and further domesticate the prairie by planting trees.

Native trees were few and far between on the prairie. Because of the expense involved, homesteaders had to choose their trees very carefully. For many, the economic choice came down to plums versus pecans.

Those who chose to plant plum trees achieved a relatively quick return on their investment. Because they grow fairly quickly, plum trees soon bring a shield against the weather.

Homesteaders could expect to harvest plums after a few short years. There is a downside though.

The drawback is that plum trees run to brush and bramble as they get older and must eventually be cut down, burned, and replaced.

Those who chose to plant pecan trees did not receive immediate gratification.

Because pecan trees grow and mature slowly, they could not be expected to provide either shelter or fruit until long after the plum trees did.

But the advantage of pecan trees is that they endure, providing benefits and beauty for many years to come.

When questioned about the choice between plums and pecans, one homesteader responded (and I do remember reading this somewhere) – he said, “If you're planting for yourself, plant plums. If you're planting for your children, plant pecans.”

So maybe by now you're wondering what this has to do with anything.

And I do want to say that the thoughts that follow grow largely out of some discussions we have had recently in our Monday morning men's group, in fact as recently as this past Monday.

One of the most difficult tasks we face, as thoughtful Christian disciples, is finding some balance between new insight and ancient truth – between what is relevant now and what was honored in the past.

One member of our men's group actually raised the question – why bother studying all these old writings, theologies and ideas. We know what the “orthodox faith” is.

But things do change. New discoveries do add to our knowledge and understanding, if we're open to being enlightened. And that's where the analogy that I described earlier kicks in. We do, in fact, have a choice between plums and pecans.

In the few minutes we have together this morning, we couldn't possibly go back and look at all the different beliefs folks who called themselves Christian have held. That's what we're doing in our smaller group studies.

But I think I can make a point by just looking at the relatively recent past. Let's think back to the 1970's for a minute, because that's when some pretty radical changes in theology began to take shape.

There was still a lot of the “old time religion” being practiced then. But in the mid 1970's ideas began to develop which became known as “liberation theologies,” many of which actually had their beginnings in the 60's with the idea of The Great Society.

Liberation theology – liberation, “freedom.” But freedom from what?

Well, the freedom of various racial groups, the freedom of one gender from the political and economic domination of the other, and many more that we could cite.

And as a result of social change, our theological emphasis changed. The social gospel, as it came to be called, replaced many of the historical doctrinal matters in Western theology. For many, political action replaced the teachings that had been handed down by church councils for centuries.

Well now, some 40 years later, I think it is fair to ask, What has happened to these new theologies and the individuals so passionately committed to them?

What did the church gain or lose, and how have the insights of liberation theologies changed the worldview of thoughtful Christians?

The 1970s also saw change in the role of language in the church. Gender-specific references to God, archaic pronouns, and grammatical constructions collided with a growing desire for inclusiveness, awakened by the liberation theologies.

Language needed to reflect social change. Looking back now at all the fuss and fury, it is interesting to note that in many cases, the rich tapestry of church life has been further embroidered by new threads of language usage – a benefit that allows the church to move on in its constant self-reforming.

And, today, at least we won't even get into the discussion of electronic media and "contemporary worship" that is all the rage for some currently.

But in short, how do thoughtful Christians decide what is necessary for belief? How do we decide between plums and pecans? Just what importance do we attach to the past as we look to the future?

As we seek some understanding of our present interpretive dilemma, the Gospel lesson for today offers help: "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send, will teach you everything, and remind you...."

It is God's Holy Spirit, God's Advocate, who provides the bridge between what is taught in the present and remembered from the past.

It is the work of God, in and through the Holy Spirit, that keeps us alive in and for the present, as well as sensitive to the past.

It is the Spirit of God that brings us all to realize that when we set aside the encumbrances of culture, ideology, and class, we can begin to see the continuity and the connections over time – the linkages between yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

We speak of our Bible as the Word of God, and certainly it is. But I submit to you that God is God of the past, present and future.

You often hear me say that the best way to understand what scripture has to say to us is to first understand what it would have meant to the people for whom it was originally written and intended – their times, their culture.

Then, given the dynamics of change - social, political, economic – we are in much better position to receive God's word for today. God's truths don't change, but how they relate to different people in different circumstances certainly can and does change.

And we are learning, through new textual discoveries and their translations, that there is a whole world of writings not formerly known to us that may also have things to teach us.

So, how do we learn all these things? Obviously the vast majority of us have little interest in becoming Bible scholars and ancient history experts.

But we can listen to and learn from those who are – and then, and here's the bottom line, invite the Holy Spirit to be your guide.

As you study, pray for and be open to the instruction of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit goes about his work in a silent way, behind the scenes.

But his work is there for all who will receive it.

And let me encourage you to read and study for information, not affirmation. Far too many people approach Bible study and religious studies looking for support for what they already have decided to believe, rather than being open to possibilities.

And also discuss. Not argue and debate, discuss, with others who are on a spiritual journey of their own, and again, for information, not affirmation.

Several folks in our small study groups have pointed out how we who are at different places in our faith journey can share our ideas, often our different views, and remain friends in the end.

And I'll let you in on a little secret. I believe the Holy Spirit has been with us, because not only have we shared with each other, we have learned from each other.

There is much to learn. But God's Holy Spirit enables us to hold it all together – with tension, certainly, but with creative tension.

So – is it plums or pecans?

I really like plum trees, and in terms of our life together in faith, I would encourage planting some. And, for the sake of the church's mission and ministry, its ongoing programs, as well as our personal faith and its development and growth, I think we would do well to keep in mind the sage advice of the old homesteader.

“If you're planting for yourself, then plant plums. If you're planting for your children, plant pecans.” Think about that, and I trust it's lesson will become clear. Our heritage is relevant as we move to the future.