

**“We’re A’ Jock Thompson’s Bairns...!”**

**Text:** “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?”

Malachi 2:10

**Scripture Readings:**

Malachi 2:10-12

Galatians 3:23-29

**Dr. Richard M. Cromie,  
Pastor Emeritus.  
Royal Poinciana Chapel  
Palm Beach, Florida  
Scottish Sunday  
January 23, 2011**

On this special Sunday in the recent traditions of the Chapel, I am pleased to share with you a little sermon that took root in Scotland some years ago titled: "We're A' Jock Thompson's Bairns!" That's the way Robert Burns, that little rascal of a poet laureate in old Scotland said it back at the time of the American Revolution, even if I have discovered that the exact reference is quite obscure. (There are actually many different sources; some Scotsmen say, "We're A' Jock Tamson's Bairns.) I first heard it in a Joiner's shop on South Street in St. Andrews while I was biding awa', waiting for our Tee time at the Old Course down the road.

A lively, somewhat contentious argument was going on between two Scottish friends about things in general, when the discussion led to the particular subjects of crime and immigration and who should be welcome in their nation and its churches – important topics I think you would agree. The repartee went this way and that way for a while – some mean-spirited, some accommodating. John Duncan thought he had the final word when he declared, "Well, "as Rabbie used to say, (That's Robert Burns, the revered poet of the people.)"We're A' Jock Tamson's Bairns." A "bairn" is a child in Lowland Scots; the A' is an abbreviation for All. "Jock Thompson is a kind of generic name for the good people of the earth, akin but not on a par, with Adam in the Bible. "We're A' Jock Thompson's Bairns" means something like: "Each and all of us, no matter what we look like or how we speak or where we worship, belongs to and with each other." Jesus does love all the little children of the World! Fine and good.

But Andrew Carstairs was not finished yet. He piped up, "Auch aye, Rabbie might have said it, but I doubt he meant it to include all the riffraff that's coming into Scotland these days!" Oh dear, even in that secluded little seaside town, known for its Ancient University, its Medieval ruins and as the continuing Home of Golf, they were worried about the degeneration of tradition and the demands being made on all things sacred and dear. They are not the first to pine, as one of our daughters recently wrote to us nostalgically, "If things could only stay the same...." Ah, if.....

\*\*\*\*\*

That's the way it started, back at the beginning. That is near enough the reason we are here. That is what was going that natal day when the Lord God said, "Let us make man and woman in our own image, after our likeness." That is what was meant to be; it was suppose to be a world of loveliness and peace. The departure took place when our forbearers were driven out of Eden. Human arrogance and disobedience were the causative factors. They wanted to be higher up the scale than they deserved. It says that they wanted to be like God. Then the first son you remember murdered his own brother. And he was forced to wander East of Eden ever after, with a mark upon his forehead.

There began the life long battle between the higher and the lower self, the struggle to become more than a solitary, selfish one. That could be as close to what the whole Bible means: the need to strive to be men and women in community, devoted to and depending on each other. Rather than investing our

lives in what we call the rat-race so that each can leap above the range of ordinary mortals, and become the triumphant one, "I". That's the difference of being human and the difference that it makes. We resemble the animals but we have the breath of God within us.

From our evolutionary origin, from a line of life time out of mind, at first some learned to be better than some others. That is how they survived in the jungle and the forest. That's how it was measured out, at first. Darwin knew that, but for our purposes that was all he knew. The fittest survived. We Homo Sapiens share that need for supremacy with the animals and fish and birds and all of nature around us. That's the shorthand version of the warfare that goes on inside every living soul who longs to be more, who cannot quite measure up to the goals that lie beyond, who having the wings of angels still has to grovel along the lower pathways of the earth. We are not Australopithecines with their tiny brains. As my original Professor of Philosophy at Pitt began and ended every class he taught with the observation that "The chief glory of men and women is to Think!"

In time the scope was broadened and rearranged. Not that some intelligent design directed it all (I am not a believer in that theory,) but the omniscient intelligence of Almighty God opened the way for it to happen. The desire and need to depend on each other became more fundamental than a series of individuals racing and rising to the top of their "ain midden heap." They found that cooperation not competition was the Grand Marshall of the great parade. They learned to work in small groups then in larger ones. Our goal now is to stretch it out across the whole wide earth.

\*\*\*\*\*

Well known William Barclay, who was a friend in Scotland. When I was in St. Andrews, he was teaching at Glasgow, but our paths often crossed. He once observed that there are two significant days in a person's life." Watch how he said it (Are you listening?) "**The first is the day that you are born.** Fair enough; otherwise you would not be here. You did not choose the moment of your birth; neither did you choose your family, race or nation. You life was given to you as a gift. You came on earth not when you chose but when the Lord had need of you. And when he no longer does, just be graceful and say goodbye.

The second salient day (you might think he would have said the day you die; but he didn't.) "The first is the day you were born; **the second is the day when you discover why?**" The day when you discover why. That is my question for one and all today: whatever age you are, however life has treating you, wherever you had been or are going, is whether you have discovered why you were given the gift of life. That is a tall order for a single Scottish Sunday morning. I know you came to hear the pipes. But I want you to ponder it and develop your answer as we go.

As you Pastor Emeritus I well know that some of you have found your purpose and pursue it with excellence. Praise God for that. Your lives and commitment to Christ and his church are a treasure to admire. I know that. I know that some of you give far more than your literal tithe of time and talent and treasure to serve the Lord and reach out to those in need. But I also know congregations well enough to guess that not everyone within the sound of my voice has caught the theme and sings the marching song on key.

I don't know about you, but I am an optimist. I am positive about the future. Not that it will be an easy journey to get out of the ditches we have dug for ourselves and those around us. Life was intended to be a struggle. Meanwhile I see increasing commitment to the universal good. I sense that it is coming. We will solve our problems in time. Arnold Toynbee once said that "Our civilization will be the first since the beginning that learned how to reach out to all the people of the earth." I might add that if he is not correct, we might not be remembered at all. We are unique in our commitment beyond the self: the people within the sound of my voice as much or more than others.

But that is not the reason I am confident. No. Much as I like us, I do not put my trust in you and me. We are mortals with all the limitations added thereto. I trust Almighty God who came to earth in his Son Jesus to save us from our sin and to make sure in person that we, even if grudgingly, stride on to the future He has chosen and which He will prosper and protect. We cannot win it by the strength of our own devices or desires. Only Christ can change a heart. Only God can match the principalities and powers of the universe.

\*\*\*\*\*

Finding your purpose is a mighty chore, and it can vary through the years. Mrs. Cromie and I find that as we grow older, we are forced to have increasing concerns with our own health and the worries we share with our family and friends. Much of our time and energy is dissipated before we begin to reach across the borders of our immediate needs. I understand; at different stages and phases life calls for new responses.

But for others, your purpose could be in reaching out to young people or the aging, to those who are lost and troubled or handicapped or unemployed. It could and better be the Mission of Jesus Christ and the Evangelistic effort to share His Forgiving Love with your neighbors and friends and beyond, or at the least, supporting those who do. Your purpose could be in race relations, education, medicine or in Inter-Faith organizations. Surely we each and all could benefit by learning more about religions not our own. You can go on with a litany of human needs.

Your purpose can surely be of your own choosing; after all it is "your purpose." But there is one proviso, one "sine-qua-nons," one essential opening gamut: if you are going to be true to the Scriptures and to Jesus Christ, your purpose must include reaching out to others, to the least of these my brethren. As Jesus said in Matthew 25, in that way you will have reached out to Him, and God will not forget. It must include something which aims for unity and peace. The day that you were born and the day that you discover why.

\*\*\*\*\*

From the equality of creation, it was not long before the children of God began to think of themselves as the chosen favorites of the Father. That was part of God's initial plan too. But they forgot that while Yahweh promised Abraham that he and his people would be blessed," God added "... in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." (Genesis 12:3) The problem was that we kept forgetting it. God's children – then and now - adore the idea that they are special. The Bible tells how they kept building walls and rules to keep the non selected people out. God kept telling them to open up the gates.

Have we not all one father? Is it not self evident that we are each "endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights: among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?" That is the way they wrote in The Declaration of Independence. I will confess and concur with some puzzlement over whether they actually meant the words to be taken literally. I think they did. But if you read Cokie Roberts book on The Founding Mothers, or know anything about the writings of Abigail Adams, it does not appear that they intended to include the ladies of the land. A married woman back then could not hold title to her own property. And you have to wonder whether they intended to include minorities, for they still endorsed slavery. Jefferson later said that he preferred a much stronger statement on racial equality, but others would not permit it. And since Independence was the goal, the other issues would have to wait. Neither did they include those who were not property owners; the poor could not even vote.

What appears certain is that in the developing nation that ideal was betrayed in the way we wandered or drifted in the opposite direction. Why do we lift ourselves up by stepping on others? Why do we erect immovable roadblocks which deny access to those God given rights? As if somehow a true brotherhood of men and women and children is impossible; as if the treasures of this life were meant to be divvied up among the aggressive achievers in the world; as if the final test of what and who we are is defined by you and me? As if love were not the final arbiter of goodness.

That's the prophetic note throughout: how to marry the warfare to excel in individual endeavors to the welfare of grasping for common goals. How do you take the ones who are good at competition, and subject that excellence to the common good? The prophets all knew it: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Amos, a farmer from the hill country of Tekoa was so distressed with man's inhumanity to man that he dropped his hoe and shovel, marched right up to the capital and complained that the poor and humble of the earth were being trampled down.

A country boy from Moresheth named Micah shouted that innocent little children were not being treated fairly, and they were dying of hunger, disease and neglect. The weak and handicapped and poor were being forsaken and oppressed. He predicted that a new King would come and put it right again. He said that the new Ruler would come out of little Bethlehem. (I wonder how he knew.) The Bible often warns that God will choose the weak and troubled of the world to shame the wise and wonderful.

The New Testament knows about it too. That's the battle which Jesus Christ fought with the religious people of his day: trying to get them to see beyond themselves, to seek the good of all and to show and share the love of God. But they couldn't, wouldn't see it. They preferred exclusion, punishment and condemnation, and they did next to nothing to correct the root causes of the failures. Jesus tried to guide them into the righteousness and peace, and they would have none of it.

That's what broke his heart. That is why Jesus wept when he looked over the city from the Mount of Olives, and why he cried himself to death upon the cross. They killed him because he had mastered life where they had failed and they could not stand it. We are so faithless to each other. Why? Why can't we let the higher self, the Christ anointed self, emerge to win the battle? Why must we wed ourselves to compromise and store up the little things we want in bigger and better barns? Do as you like. But nothing can erase the horror of the final words in Luke: "Thou fool, this night your soul will be required of thee!" (Luke 12:20)

Early in the Book of Acts (Acts 2:44-47) there is a beautiful and lovely story of how they were all together in one place. It says they agreed on everything, and they sold what they had and distributed the proceeds to everyone who had need. That's nice. Preachers perennially use that passage to make their congregations feel guilty at Stewardship Sermon time saying, "If they gave us everything for the kingdom, why can't we?"

While I would never dare to hint that the Bible does not tell the whole story, I think that if you had been there you would have found that while true, it was a fleeting moment of time. Before long they were vying with each other for control. There was that quarrel about whether James and John should be the number one and two disciples. And three chapters later Ananias and his wife Sapphira started a terrible row when they sold some property and held back some of the money for themselves and for that they paid an awful price. We are supposed to care about each other.

Speaking of arguments, St. Paul tells us how he went face to face with Simon Peter at the Council of Jerusalem - no hints or guesses or innuendos. "I told him 'No!' This Good News of the Gospel of our Lord is not meant to be your possession or mine," it is given to be shared. It belongs to Jesus Christ. When he says "Follow Me!" he means it. We are to follow in his footsteps, not counting the cost, but sharing the good news with everyone on earth, every last one. The Cost of Discipleship is what Bonhoeffer called it. I don't know if you want to take it at that price, but that's the price it is. There are no bargains or sale prices in the Kingdom of God.

Paul won the argument as you know. Thank God. The whole missionary journey of the Church began with that solitary step. The Good News, as life itself, is on loan to you and me, for a given time. We do not know the hour or the day when it will be taken back. Our skills and faith and confidence are also on loan and one day they too will be taken back by the One Creator God.

When you get to heaven's door - I do not know, but I think that the Lord will first ask you whether you believed in the power and peace of his presence. Did you give your life to him and accept his offer of forgiveness in Jesus Christ? By the way, if your answer today is "No," that is your place to start. But then without taking a breath, I think he will go on to ask, "Did you share the Good News with the least of these my brethren?" Or did you just quietly revel in it, treating it as if it belonged to you and yours alone? Or worse, did you ignore it altogether. What did you do to reach out to all of those in need, how many lives did you touch for Jesus Christ our Lord?

"Ah, that's the trouble," the proud Aberdonian said to me one day, "We live in our own wee worlds." We are bound up with all the petty problems, immersed in the idiosyncrasies which concern us and our own kind only. C.S. Lewis warned that unless we extricate ourselves, we will sit around, "Twiddling our thumbs and tapping our toes and digging our gardens" (G.B. Shaw added) "until it is time to dig our graves!"

Take it to those who are lonely and alone for whom so few take the time to care. Take it everywhere you go as if it were your food and drink. Hurry it out to all the children of the world who weep for want of food and proper care. Take it to all the sick and broken hearted or who are in grief over the loss of one they loved too much to lose. Take it to those who are unemployed, who weep to be able to take care of themselves and their families. Take it to all the warring nations and peoples who put their trust in power and stealth and terrorism. Take it to those who worry for the future, or who retain worries about the past which will not go away. Take it to the young people who have lost meaning in their lives, who need something to do and the training to master it. Take it to the aged men and women who are bewildered that life is ending and they have nothing to hold on to.

Take it to the theology and practices of the Churches of the land. What Ecclesiastical games we play. What strange boundaries we draw as to who can belong and who can take the rank of leadership. When I was first ordained, perfectly sane Christian ministers argued, almost coming to acrimonious blows over whether women should be ordained into the Gospel ministry. Women, you know, females, like you mother, wife, daughter or sister. They now lead the churches with competence. But critics harped on about how the Bible tells women "to keep silent in the church and go home and ask their husbands what went on." (I Corinthians 14:34-35) What strange fiddling we do while the world goes on to ruin.

Nowadays the leaders of the major churches of the land harry each other similarly over whether those Christians who adopt an alternate life style are worthy of the halo of ordained ministry. Oh how we strive to keep others in their place. One day the Lord God will write in huge enormous letters across the sky, "So what!" No wonder recent generations are moving away from our style of organized Christianity. I doubt that anyone listening will change a point of view, but if our purpose is to include all who love the Lord, we need to think and pray about it together. I mean...my father used to say, "Who kiddeth whom?"

Bishop Colin Morris accepted a diocese out in Africa several decades ago. In one of his books he tells the tragic story of the young African Christian man who died from hunger right outside the door of his fancy Bishop's Residence. At the exact same moment the Christian leaders were having a scrumptious lunch inside and debating the proper wording for the Anglo-Methodist sacramental system in the Mission Field. "Oh dear," he murmured, "If we had just opened the door, we could have saved the life of a fellow human being."

\*\*\*\*\*

Back in his day they used to pan Robert Burns by saying he was too common, too simple, too human, so lacking in the ecclesiastical graces, so joyful, so disrespectful to the Leaders of the church. They called him up before the Church Session more than once to chastise him. But the one complaint they never leveled at him was that he was a hypocrite. He never was. He practiced what he preached. If you know his marvelous, almost hilarious poem, "Holy Willie's Prayer," which exposes the rank hypocrisy an Elder-in-Charge named William Fisher, you already know that. His theology was simple: "Live by what you know; Love when you are able; Laugh at others and yourself; and leave the rest to God."

Burns wrote a letter to Mrs. Dunlap, his dear friend and patroness when he was struck down by the illness which would take his young life away at 37. (It is scary to think that I am twice as old as that.) He confessed that his years had been stained by follies. He said he was sorry that he never was able to live up to the high expectations of the man he longed to be. He wrote: "God knows my dear Mrs.

Dunlap that I'm no saint, but if I could, and I think I have as far as I was able, my goal would be to wipe away the tears from every eye that's weeping."

There are some marching words: "In so far as you are able, seek to wipe the tears from any eye or heart that's weeping." If for no other reason that that "We're A' Jock Thompson's Bairns," little children of the same father. No matter how grown up and old you are, or are becoming, each and all are in need love and tenderness. If you have to walk through the darkness, it sure helps to have someone caring hold your hand. Every last one of us at times needs someone to lean on to help to share the burdens of the day. It can be lonely out there in the midst of the modern jungles, especially when you have nothing to eat or when you look up over the top of the highest mountain and wonder what on earth is coming next. It can be lonely.

I often think about my brother Bobby. We were inseparable when we were young. I was his big brother, assigned to take care of him. If you picked trouble with Bobby you were automatically in the ring with me, and vice versa. We laughed and loved and we even got in trouble now and then. (Not that that would surprise you...) He was the best man at our wedding all those years ago. Through it all we rejoiced that we were children of our beloved parents, along with our two sisters. And how well we also knew that we were children of God. But darn it all, Bobby died before his time at age 43. And, while I am a big boy and I am absolutely certain of my faith in the Risen Christ, as he was, I still have never found another Bobby. I think I am always on the lookout. For each and all of us need to have brothers and sisters in the world, someone to walk with and talk with and cry with. If you have to walk through the darkness of the valley, it sure helps to have someone to hold your hand. And mind you, so does everyone else on earth.

The Book of Revelation promises that in Christ the day will come when tears shall be no more and there will be no suffering or darkness or pain. (Revelation 21:1-4) You can count on it. Sure you can. But meanwhile, Christian up and at it. There is work for us to do. The family of the Lord needs tending to - if for no other reason than that "We are All Jock Thompson's Bairns! The family of the Lord which crosses time and space and race and riches and nationalities and religious persuasion needs tending to, and there is no one else on earth to tend it. Promise now to join the great parade.

We are but fellow travelers  
Along life's dusty way.  
If anyone can play the pipes,  
For God's sake let him play.

\*\*\*\*\*

When Malachi told them they had provoked the Lord to anger, (Malachi 2:9) announcing that they had missed the point and angered God, they asked, "How did we anger God?" The Prophet answered, "By showing partiality in your instruction and in the way you live your lives." Partiality, oh dearie me what a word that is; it means having a bias or prejudice against others.

Then come the words of our text: "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another?" (Malachi 2:10)

If you know Robert Burns at all, you will already have guessed how I intend to end this sermon on our Scottish Sunday morning. In what near enough is his most meaningful poem, "For A' That." It ends with these famous verses:

Is there for honest poverty,  
That hangs his head, and a' that?  
The coward slave, we pass him by,  
We dare be poor for a' that.

For a' that, and a' that,  
Our toil's obscure, and a' that;  
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,  
The man's the gowd for a' that.

.....

Then let us pray that come it may,  
(As come it will for a' that,)  
That Sense and Worth, o'er a' the earth,  
Shall bear the gree, and a' that.

For a' that, and a' that,  
It's coming yet for a' that,  
That man to man, the world o'er,  
Shall brothers be, for a' that.

Soon many it come, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, now and forever more.  
Amen.

