

Withholding Tax
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 98:7-9
Reading from the New Testament: Acts 10:44-48

Throughout my life it has been safe to say that the United Kingdom and France have been regarded among our closest of allies. This seems a bit ironic when you consider our entwined and complicated histories. Just ask King George III whether he regarded America as a stalwart partner on the global stage. Or for that matter, imagine a reality show laying bare the prequal to the feuding Hatfields and McCoys, otherwise known as Medieval France and England. We're talking about hostilities and tensions that go back a thousand years. Sure, they were allies in two world wars, yet even as late as the 1960's, the United Kingdom applied twice to join the precursor to the European Union, only to be vetoed both times by who? France.

To say the nature of the relationship between these two countries throughout their histories has been that of a dysfunctional family would not only be an understatement, but also quite literal. Note that the archetype for royalty in England is William the Conqueror, who was French, raised in the region of Normandy. Following a succession crisis in the Norman dynasty, England was ruled by the House of

Plantagenet, also French, a dynasty that would soon also inherit claims to the kingdom of France. You see, when King Charles IV of France died with no male heirs, his sister Isabella (known also as the "she-wolf of France") who had gone off to England to marry King Edward II, assumed her son, Eddie.³ held the rightful claim to France's throne. Surely, she assumed, that's what Uncle Charlie would have wanted. However, when the nobles in France nixed that idea, tensions evolved into what we now know as the Hundred Years' War. Isabella returned to France, with her lover, and then invaded England and deposed and disposed of her husband Edward.² so that Eddie.³ would become King of England, instead of France. Cue the theme to *The Days of Our Lives*. Of course, all of this gave wild Willie Shakespeare plenty of drama to write about.

Well, family drama and border envy didn't end at the close of the Hundred Years' War. Just ask Mary, Queen of Scots, that faithful Presbyterian widow of France's King who would later be divorced from her head by her half-sister Elizabeth I.

All this drama presages the navigation of tempests that would arise over family ties, borders, and nationalistic impulses within the

sardonically named United Kingdom, which is characteristically not so united in this age of Brexit as borders harden and nationalistic impulses flair, much like Boris Johnson's hair. That post-Covid trip you were planning from Dublin to Belfast to Glasgow to London has become a bit more complicated as England divorces the continent, and Scotland and Northern Ireland contemplate divorcing England. Oh Britannia! Not so much.

Of course, there has been no shortage of drama on this side of the pond when it comes to family ties, polarized politics, and borders, both geographical and ideological. Just a cursory overview of history reveals how arbitrary are the lines that define, constrain, enrage, confuse, and describe our lives.

According to my sister, I'm 47.7% French and German; 43% British and Irish; 5.1% Scandinavian; and 4% Broadly Northwestern European. I guess that makes me more of a Swiss Calvinist than a Scots Presbyterian. It all begs the question of whether our perceived or assumed identities are nearly as defined as we'd like to think they are, and whether it has ever been worth all the blood spilt over fungible lines that obscure our basic identity as children of God.

Many of you here and at home are from somewhere else. I've lived 22 years in Missouri, 3 years in Virginia, and 35 years in North Carolina, 21 of those years in Charlotte. So, am I a Missourian, a North Carolinian, a Charlottean? And in the end, does it truly matter all that much? I mean, you are human, a child of God, loved-beyond-death by Christ, as is everyone else on this orb called earth. That's what defines us. When we start adding lines and borders and walls to that is where trouble starts leaving *Post-It* notes on our scruples, inscribed with hints that inflame our insecurities and fertilize our suspicions.

Ephesians 2:14 declares that Christ "is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility," thus affirming the notion that we are human, children of God, loved-beyond-death by Christ along with everyone else on this orb called earth. The rationale for such declarations is stated in the Hebrew Bible, revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and established by an encounter between, of all people, a recovering Pharisee and a Roman centurion. Not quite the match you'd expect on *eharmony.com*. Does God have a sense of humor, or what?

To Abram, the Lord promised, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Throughout his public ministry, Jesus was regularly ignoring the borders, lines, walls, and grievances that divide us, healing a centurion's son, touching the leper, entering that deep conversation with the Samaritan woman, making the outsider the hero in his parables. And today's narrative takes us to a rooftop in Joppa where a hungry ex-fisherman named Peter is dreaming of a feast.

A vision pops into Peter's mind of the heavens opening with a tablecloth descending, carrying in it a zoo filled with a cross-section of the animal kingdom. And the voice of the Lord is heard encouraging our old friend Peter to open a farm-to-table restaurant. To which Peter protests, "Lord, I'm on a diet! No ham sandwiches for me." Peter is a faithful child of Israel, inheriting a thick cookbook with more restrictions than recipes. "Sure," Peter's thinking, "the Roman Golden Corral, tempting as that is, isn't kosher, and Lord, if this isn't some sort of test, you should be ashamed for thinking I'd so easily abandon our sacrosanct dietary regulations like I'm some kind of gluttonous Neanderthal Gentile."

Well, the Lord shuts down that protest real fast, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." In other words, Peter, some of those borders, boundaries, lines, and prohibitions you've been taking so seriously are not as threatening or as impregnable as you may think.

At the same time that Peter is debating the virtue of crab cakes, visitors are arriving on the doorstep, sent by a Roman Centurion in Caesarea, i.e., these are Gentiles, you know, the very ones Peter was just trashing. So, the Lord sends the sheepish Peter on with his visitors to Caesarea to meet with Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, a person with authority, a Gentile, you know, a person with whom such a visit would render Peter unclean in the eyes of the temple priests.

So, Peter grabs a couple of guys from the neighborhood and heads out, all stressed out, like a gang leader headed to a peace summit in a rival's territory. Can you hear the music in the background? "Boy, boy, crazy boy, Get cool boy!"

This is not a meeting of old friends. These are strangers, culturally tuned to stay out of each other's way, walk on the other side of the street, haunt different bars, and yes, eat different foods. In

addition, there's an inequity of power here. One is a centurion, a commander, an officer overseeing some 80 Roman soldiers, representative of the occupying force ruling over Israel. Peter, on the other hand, is a fisherman headed toward bankruptcy, having left his boat behind to follow Jesus; and though Jesus, Lord of all creation, has designated Peter as his "rock," this particular rock doesn't necessarily carry much weight in the salons of Caesarea.

When we lived in a small town, we'd occasionally be invited to the big local social event of the season, and honestly, amidst the movers and shakers, I always felt a bit like a kazoo in a symphony orchestra. I was just hoping they'd have a dog I could pet. That's where my head was at. I cannot imagine trying to hold my own amidst the powerful, particularly those who so easily hold their power over you like a spotlight exposing your smallness, your differences, your lack of credentials, authority, influence, connections. Add to that the fact that the Centurion held the power of the sword, and you know Peter was stressin' about that.

However, the actual meeting of Peter and Cornelius was no power struggle, but truly, a transformative, world-shaping event, the lessons of which we are continuing to struggle to learn.

To Peter's surprise, he wasn't being summoned to an inquisition. He was being invited as a guest lecturer, an evangelist even. For Cornelius, this wasn't going to be just another occasion for some arrogant religious insider come to tell him why he is less than and outside of God's concern. No, Cornelius would be meeting Peter on level ground at the wreckage of that "dividing wall of hostility" to which Jesus had taken a sledgehammer.

Beginning to comprehend what was happening, Peter offered his best Jesus sermon, but not without first confessing what we so struggle to get through our thick heads and stiff necks. Peter says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality..."

Did you hear that Carolina and Duke combatants; Yankees and Grits; French and English; Catholics and Protestants; Christians and Jews; Hindis and Mohammedans; male, female, LGBTQ+; Red, yellow,

black, and white, all are precious in God's sight? "I truly understand that God shows no partiality."

You are God's creation; God's beloved; period. We may speak different languages, look differently, worship differently, think differently, and yet, still: You are God's creation; God's beloved; period.

Today, Luke tells us, "the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'"

Americans can get awfully prickly when it comes to talk about taxes: can't sustain governance without them; don't like paying them. Yet, every day we burden ourselves with a massive withholding tax whenever and wherever we allow the arbitrary lines and boundaries that would divide us to cloud the love of God that would unite us. Resentment, suspicion, malevolence, prejudice, animosity, self-righteousness, and exclusion exact a hefty price that robs our spirits of

life. Remember what Oscar Wilde said, "The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future."

We have forgotten that whenever we look to others with the thought that we are somehow in and they are somehow out, such thoughts are the playground of ignorance. In Bible study this week, our friend Doris Boyd offered a thought to remember when we allow a lack of understanding to motivate us to grab those tools we need to build yet another fence. Listen and learn. She said, "When we know better we can be better." Good fences do not make good neighbors. By the grace of God's Spirit, we can always find a hole in the fence. Amen.