

# What was I thinking?

May 2, 2021



## **Who do you think you are? Scottish Sunday**

One of the many things that appealed to me about First Presbyterian Church of Athens, before my family and I came here, was the fact that you have a Scottish Reformation Sunday. It meant so much to me that I made sure we were here for it in 2013. It was my first Sunday on the job, and I came to work in my kilt. I also learned that our bagpiper for many years, Henry Frantz, was the person who gave me my one and only bagpipe lesson in Atlanta before I moved. Looking back on my vocation as a church musician, though I've served many denominations, I must have been predestined to be a Presbyterian because I've served the most consecutive years as a Presbyterian. If Scottish Reformation Sunday is my "anniversary" of sorts, I am beginning my ninth year at First Presbyterian Church of Athens. My mother made the trip from South Carolina to be present for my first Sunday.



Over the years, my mother taught me about our Scottish ancestry. Her maiden name was MacLean. There's also some MacRae further back on my father's side. In doing genealogy research on my own, I've seen other Scottish names in the branches of the family tree. Over time my appreciation of our Scottish background has continued to grow.

We all have names. Our last names usually tell us what family we belong to, from whom, what, and where we came. Last names are sometimes changed in times of conflict and persecution when people don't want anyone to know their background. Some are adopted and become part of a new family, taking on their name. Some change their names when they are married, and some do not. It depends on how we want to be seen, who we want people to see that we are.

We're given names when we're born, usually names chosen by our parents. We may be named after other members of our family, grandparents, parents, or others. Some name their children after people in the Bible, and those names usually have a symbolic meaning. When we knew our son was on the way, Kate and I talked about names. We narrowed it down to two. I was in favor of Ian, which is a version of John, a name with Scottish roots meaning "the Lord is gracious." But Kate wanted to name him Aiden, which means "little fire" or "fiery young man." As I began to witness what a woman carrying a child goes through for nine months and more, I relented, so Aiden was born. He has certainly lived up to his name (and was even being baptized on Pentecost to confirm it).



In the case of Scottish names, we see "Mac," at the beginning, which means "son of." MacDonald means "son of Donald." In learning about the names in my Scottish family tree, I discovered MacRae means "son of grace." I learned that many in that clan served the church in some way. I've seen two explanations of the name MacLean. One is "son of the servant of St. John." That certainly has biblical roots. I was given the first name of John, after my grandfather, John Duncan Maclean, and there are many other John MacLeans, so that makes sense. Our clan motto is "Virtue Mine

Honour.” On the other hand, the other, more often used meaning of the name MacLean is “Gillean of the Battleaxe,” a warrior with an obvious reputation, and while our clan motto may be virtuous, the clan slogan is *Bàs no Beatha* (“Death or victory”). That explains the stubborn streak.

That’s all interesting history. I had seen pictures, read books, and had a good collection of tartan ties and scarves, but that’s all it was, until I got to go to Scotland. Where I came from, and who I was, suddenly became more real. After a choir tour in Scotland, Kate and I, and another couple from our church took a side trip to the Isle of Mull, where my clan roots are, to Duart Castle. All visitors to Duart Castle can sign a guest book, but if you are a MacLean of Duart, there’s a special clan/family guest book that is brought out for you to sign. I did that, and I also started turning pages, going back in time, I wondered if I would find something, and I did. My parents had made at trip to Scotland and Duart and had signed the clan guest book more than ten years earlier. That was especially meaningful because my father had died two years before my tip to Scotland. I was following in his footsteps. In the castle gift shop I was looking for something for my mother and saw a Celtic cross on a chain. I was told, “It’s the MacLean cross, of course.” Our family had its own specific cross? “You know the real one is on the island of Iona, right?” I did not. Iona is a special place, a destination for people on spiritual pilgrimages from all over the world. We were going to travel there the next day.

We left the castle and drove the rest of the way across the island of Mull to Fionnphort, where we spent the night in a bed and breakfast before taking the ferry to Iona the next morning. Before dinner, Kate and I took a walk through a small cemetery across the street. I saw a number of headstones with the name MacLean, including Coll MacLean who ran the ferry boat to Iona for 52 years. The next morning, we took the ferry to Iona and started exploring. We walked through what remained of the Augustinian nunnery. I saw that Anna MacLean was Prioress of the nunnery until her death in 1543. Her tombstone depicts her with hands joined in prayer and her head resting on a pillow borne by angels. The nunnery was occupied until the Reformation, when it passed into the hands of the MacLeans of Duart. We saw the real MacLean’s Cross, probably put up in the fifteenth century with its depiction of the crucifixion on the back of the wheel-head (the circular part of a Celtic cross). For centuries, Iona was a special burial place, in fact it’s a burial place of kings. Those brought over by boat for burial were transported along a path to the graveyard. It is said they stopped at MacLean’s Cross for a prayer along the way.



I was humbled, to say the least, to learn my ancestral connection to the church went back not just years or decades, but centuries. Maybe there is something to this predestination thing.

I borrowed the title of this article from a TV show Kate and I watched a few times, where people were taken on a journey to discover their ancestral roots, which often included some surprises. We also learned the show was also a play to get us to join Ancestry.com (for a price) to learn about our own ancestral roots.

This is just my story. We all have stories as individuals, as families, and as the church and our particular branch of it. We all have connections, and not just blood relationship. As Presbyterians, we have an ancestral connection to Scotland. Our roots are there.

Part of our acknowledgement of our Scottish heritage is displaying tartans (sometimes incorrectly called “plaids”). Some of us will wear tartan kilts, ties, the pastors may wear tartan stoles, and we will have a processional with tartan flags. There are many tartans that represent clans or families. Other tartans symbolize districts or regions, places where people live or gather.



If you don't have any Scottish background and this all seems to have no meaning for you, it's important to know that historically, clans are not just blood relatives. Clans were and are gatherings of people for protection and for economic, political, and social support. Clan is just another name for family, and a good example of that is our church family. We are a group of people gathered together to support each other. According to the Montreat Scottish Society, "The tartan is a symbol of this love and togetherness."

Speaking of Montreat, there is a Montreat tartan. It is a symbol of the place special to many of us. Quite a bit of thought goes into choosing and arranging a pattern of colors for a tartan, and the symbolism of the Montreat tartan is a good example:

Blue – for the Saltire (flag) of Scotland

Green – for the hillsides and forests of Western North Carolina

Red – for the burning bush, symbol of the Church of Scotland whose motto is "And it was not consumed."

Black – for the Black Mountain Range in North Carolina where Montreat is located

Yellow – for the sun's power and warmth. It incorporates the warm welcome that awaits the people that come to Montreat and the spiritual power that permeates the Montreat Conference Center



This year, for the first time, two Montreat tartan flags have been added to our collection and will be used in our service this Sunday.

Our gathering for in-person worship is still limited, but we're still a clan, a family, not just related by blood, but banded together to offer support to each other. If you're not joining us in person, join us virtually. I just had another thought – this will be a communion Sunday and we're having to improvise a bit in terms of at-home communion elements – maybe you should have some shortbread cookies and your drink may be of the scotch variety, or maybe at that time of day, tea will do. However you can, join our “clan.”



(see below for more about our tartan flag collection)

God be with you till we meet again.

John



