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## **Sunday Sermon: “Irish Spirituality”**

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In the summer of 1976 I took a car trip from England, where I was living, to Ireland. England that summer was experiencing a drought and heat wave, there was a month and half where the temperature was above 80 degrees. People were passing out all over the county from the heat. The green fields were baked brown. The only positive point for that summer in Europe was that the wine turned out good. Anyway it seemed like a good time for a trip. I took my 1971 Volvo and the dog and visited about as south in Ireland as possible due to the IRA bombing campaign at the time in England and Ireland. We took the overnight ferry from Wales to Cork. The first thing that struck me was the green. I'd never seen such a constant and pervasive green. It was as if the countryside was green velvet.

To understand Irish spirituality is in some ways to understand the green that is Ireland and the Irish. But to understand Irish spirituality we have to understand what is meant by spirituality. What I understand as spirituality is to feel something greater than yourself. We each experience it differently. Next week Dick's BYOT service will talk about spirituality again. It is hard to define and harder still to create. We can create a condition in which spirituality can be felt, but it is up to each of you to experience it. That depends on your emotional state which may be generated by music or memories and each of your personal history.

Let me tell you a story. The Hazelden Foundation in Center City, Minnesota is a center for recovery from substance abuse. It was a center that was associated with Betty Ford.

The center employs the twelve-step system that Alcohol Anonymous uses. Some years ago a student offered a presentation on twelve-step spirituality. As he was laboring to make his point about the pervasive nature of spirituality, one of the participants asked for an image to help her "picture" the words. "What is it like?" she asked, her expression earnest and intent.

"I think I understand what you mean by spirituality, but can you give me a picture?"

Momentarily stumped, the presenter thought for several frustrating minutes staring across the conference- lounge at the massive stone fireplace, so carefully fashioned out of rock deposited in the locality during Minnesota's glacial era. Late afternoon sun streamed into the room, warming the stones with light. Suddenly the stones themselves came into focus. The deep reddish rocks, flecked with golden specks; the green-hued pieces, irregularly marbled in white; the many- shaded blue slabs, their shallow niches sparkling as if with silver. Which of these stones could best represent "the spiritual"?

"Physical, mental, spiritual"—the phrase reverberated in his mind, but which of the rocks provided the best image for each of those realities? The workshop participants, ever polite and patient, shifted quietly in the rare silence. Then, suddenly, the image came! Looking at the stones, wondering at their beauty, the presenter's vision made one of those gestalt switches, and he saw not the individual stones but the chimney itself.

The mortar - the bland, grayish, pebbly "stuff" that held all those stones together - that was "the spiritual"! The spiritual is not some separate category, one specific type of stone or a particular stone of great beauty, but the substance that holds everything together.

"Spirituality is like that mortar in the fireplace," he offered pensively, finally breaking the long silence. "Just as the mortar makes the chimney a chimney, allowing it to stand up straight and tall, beautiful in its wholeness, 'the spiritual' is what makes us wholly human. It holds our experiences together, shapes them into a whole, gives them meaning, and allows them— and us— to be whole.

Without the spiritual, however physically brave or healthy or strong we may be, however mentally smart or clever or brilliant we may be, however emotionally integrated or mature we may be, we are somehow not 'all there.'"

So spirituality would be what held the facts or the facets of the Irish culture together. Now many of you can say whether something is spiritual or not few can say what is spiritual. I think that is common.

Prior to Patrick there was spirituality in Ireland. It was a druid spirituality that recognized a certain tie to the land, the green land. This pagan spirituality was reflected in various celebrations that marked the seasons. Their calendar was divided into two parts, the light part and the dark part, with four great feast days

marking the year: The light part was Bealtaine and Lughnasadh, May 1 and August 1.

Bealtaine or May Day is the first day of the light part of the year. Cattle are driven through great bonfires to protect them and ensure fertility. Young couples jump through the fire to marry.

Lúghnasadh marks the beginning of harvest and celebrates the victory of the god Lúgh against the earth spirits that would keep the harvest. Lúgh is very much a "Christ" figure in that he died for the sake of humans, pierced and hung from a tree.

The Dark Part of the year featured Samhain (November 1). Our Halloween was the Celtic New Year, marks the end of the harvest, and the beginning of the dark half of the year. All lights are extinguished until relit by a central bonfire. This day is a "gap" in time and consciousness when travel to the other world and through time was possible. The other feast is Imbolc on February 1. St. Bridget's Day marks the first day of Spring and the middle of the dark half, the time for the reemergence of green things. This marks the first flowing of milk in the udders of the ewes and is associated with the goddess Bríd.

With Patrick the Pagan Deities took on Christian identity. Many of Patrick's saints like St. Bridget, the abbess of Kildare was also the Goddess of Knowledge and Life, protector of the family against want and need, heroic generosity.

And St. Columba of Iona was warrior monk and Druid poet.

Ireland like Scotland was never conquered by Rome. When Patrick brought Christianity to the Emerald Isle in the 400's he had to convince the Irish, not conquer them. In many ways the Irish captured Patrick rather than the other way around. Read his confession as it was the tradition of the day there was a true humility apart from his conviction that he was bringing to the Irish a truth they did not possess. He was as he tells us a "sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful" when he was taken slave by Irish raiders as he tended sheep in a Roman Wales or Northern England. In the Roman Empire, Christianity had just been made the state religion about fifty years earlier. Since Constantine, the emperors used Christianity as a way of solidifying the empire and holding the hearts of the conquered peoples. Patrick was taken to county Antrim in the center of what is

now Northern Ireland. The devotion you can hear in Patrick's confession could have easily have been toward the government in Rome as for a religious purpose.

As a slave Patrick tended flocks during most of his teens. During the years he spent tending the animals, Patrick learned to speak the native Celtic tongue.

In his years of lonely shepherding Patrick spent hours in meditation and prayer and reflection on the beauty of the Irish countryside. It is this experience of living with nature and meditating on the land around him that gives us such an earthy feel to the Celtic sense of the divine. This spirituality can be heard in one of Patrick's prayers called the blessing of the Munster people:

A blessing on the Munster people --

Men, youths, and women;

A blessing on the land

That yields them fruit.

A blessing on every treasure

That shall be produced on their plains,

Without any one being in want of help,

God's blessing be on Munster.

A blessing on their peaks,

On their bare flagstones,

A blessing on their glens,

A blessing on their ridges.

Like the sand of the sea under ships,

Be the number in their hearths;

On slopes, on plains,

On mountains, on hills, a blessing.

We can also hear this same respect for the simple and life close to the land in this more modern Irish blessing.

May there always be work for your hands to do.

May your purse always carry a shilling or two.

May the sun always play on your window pane.

May a rainbow chase after each spot of rain.

May the hand of a friend always be near you.

May God fill your heart with gladness and cheer you.

Patrick also learned about the Druid religion that would later become part of the Irish Christianity. After about five years he had a vision that he would escape and go back to the Christian world and serve the Christian God. He escaped his captivity and made a long journey to a sea port where he worked passage to Roman Britain. Arriving in Britain, he went to the continent to the northern coast of Gaul and studied under Saint Germanus, and was ordained a Priest. Patrick was charged to go back to Ireland as bishop of Ireland.

Patrick went back to Armagh in the north. Patrick only studied for a few years before he returned to Ireland. While he spoke Latin and his confession was in Latin and was familiar with the Vulgate or Latin translation of Greek scriptures, his written Latin was not any great scholarship that was the custom of many of the Priests who were sent to convert unbelievers. His portrayal in confessions of being an ignorant yokel was somewhat accurate.

Ireland prior to Patrick bringing of Roman knowledge to the country was prehistoric and had no written language but had as long an oral tradition as they had a tradition of being fierce fighters. While the people were illiterate, they had great memorization skills. Patrick had learned much of this oral tradition and the legend and tradition of the blarney stone was more powerful in winning the hearts of the Irish for Christianity than any great scholarship would prove to be. Patrick was a teller of tales and much of his success in winning the country for the church comes through this talent.

This oral tradition and story-telling tradition is a real part the Irish and Irish spirituality. If you read Frank McCourt's Angela's Ashes, you get a glimpse into the way language has formed a part of Irish spirituality.

The two poems by John O'Donohue both point to the earth as a source and responsibility. In Irish spirituality nature doubles for the divine. Sex becomes again a druid rite. Which is one reason I maintain the religious authorities are so puritanical, trying to push the ancient religion out of the culture. Irish poetry also combines metaphors of nature with intellectual or metaphysical topics. "when the canvas frays in the currach of thought. The currach is an ancient Irish boat which is made of boughs and covered with canvas and said to bring St. Brendon the Navigator on an expedition toward the new World. In the praise of the earth the poet deifies the earth and earth processes.

The Irish love to tell a story and the story telling is as powerful as any found in scripture. Now you have to understand that Irish stories are all true even if the facts discussed are not that accurate. So were the stories about Patrick. It was said for example that he illustrated the concept of the trinity to the simple illiterate pagans but showing them a shamrock which became the country's symbol.

Ireland of the time was small fiefdoms. Patrick would win over a Druid King and with his help he would move on to the next fiefdom. He would leave each fiefdom recreated as a less war like place and without the slavery that had originally brought him to the Isle.

As he left a region it would have a church and a school beside it. These schools were the monasteries of their day and were not the large cloistered establishments of the Middle Ages but small settlement that were by the fields and served to education the people of the region.

They were not isolated from the world - no vows were taken and the clergy were always allowed to marry. The monasteries were associations of studious men and women, who occupied their time in

transcribing the Scriptures, in cultivating such sciences as were then known, and instructing the young. Part of the Irish spirituality was the relative equality of women which was not found in the more Romanized church of Britain and the continent. This and the druid influences made Patrick's Ireland less prudish than

the Roman and family size generally reflected a more sexual spirituality than less. Ireland's general isolation made changes generally slower.

During Patrick's life, he founded 365 churches, and a school arose beside each church. It is from these monasteries that much of classical knowledge was kept during the Dark Ages of Europe because of Ireland's relative isolation from Continental influences.

This tradition of scholarship is another legacy of the Irish Spirit. And was said to be how the Irish saved Civilization by keeping Classical knowledge in their monasteries. Patrick's ministry covered a period of 60 years. In AD 489 Patrick died. His tomb is in town of Downpatrick, in Co. Down.

Today we celebrate St. Patrick with green, and other sensual pleasures like music and beer. I found that while each village had a parish church, the center of the village was the Pub. I found it more inclusive than English pub in that they not only welcomed dogs but children too. Everyone entering was welcome to join whatever music or story telling occurred. Irish spirituality would link the growth of spring crop of flowers to the health of the people. Like my story of the mortar and the chimney, the Celtic spirituality with its prehistoric pagan roots forms the cement that holds the fabric of the Irish religion and peoples together.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen