

“You Asked for It: Celtic Spirituality”

Psalm 65 and Acts 17: 22-31

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

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A little over a year ago, one of our members went on a trip that included time at Iona – a small island of Scotland, known for the religious community that resides there. Her time on this trip was transformational. Besides exploring her Scottish Presbyterian roots, she experienced the presence of God in her life in a way that touched her deeply. Upon her return, she shared a bit of that experience with me, and hoped that perhaps a group might start here at Fairmount to explore the Celtic spirituality which she had found so meaningful. When numerous small groups began last fall, there was not a shared interest in pursuing such a group, so none was started. My hunch, and perhaps hers, was that not many of us really knew what Celtic spirituality was all about, so that those pursuing a small group experience chose something else.

When this “You Asked For It” topic was requested – I knew by whom! However, I still didn’t really know much about Celtic Spirituality, or what it might offer to us today. (And judging from the reactions of various folks when I said that it was my topic for today, I’m guessing that I wasn’t alone!) So the past couple of weeks, I have had a “quick immersion” in the wealth of material available. You will note that our entire service today, from prelude to postlude, makes use of Celtic materials. Our choir anthem today is “St. Patrick’s Breastplate,” perhaps the most famous of Celtic poetry.

As a disclaimer right away, I must say that I have only begun to skim the surface of the over 200,000 websites and thousands of books available on the subject! However, even the little that I have learned has whet my appetite for a chance to experience – perhaps together with some of you – some of the gifts of this down-to-earth spiritual understanding.

First things first, however! We must start with some very basic definitions, so that we can be on the same footing. The word “spirituality” which is tossed around so much these days, needs a quick definition. Most simply, it has to do with the life of the spirit. The American Heritage Dictionary defines “spirit” as: That which is traditionally believed to be the vital principle or animating force within living beings. It can also be thought of as relating to the soul or relating to God. The dictionary goes on, but I think we’ll leave it there!

Then we have to clarify what we mean by “Celtic.” (Which, by the way, according to the dictionary can appropriately be pronounced either “Keltic” or “Seltic”, with the former being the first rendering.) Celtic, obviously relates to the Celts, an ancient European people who shared a family of languages now represented mainly by Gaelic, Irish and Welsh. I must tell you, that even in my limited

research, it is clear that scholars themselves are not in agreement on much of anything as it relates to the Celts and their relationship with the Christian church. So, for our purposes, I will use Celtic to mean the culture and traditions that would seem to have arisen between the 4th and 6th centuries in what we now know as Ireland, Wales, and parts of Scotland, France and Great Britain, and which has always managed to survive in one form or another. I am following the supposition that this expression of the church was relatively separated from Rome until 664.

With the number of print materials, CDs, and websites referring to Celtic Spirituality, it is obvious that it is an area which is appealing to a large number of folks. However, I need to acknowledge, that not all of Celtic spirituality defines itself as “Christian.” (That is clearly a topic for another day!) Today, as those gathered in a decidedly Christian Church, we will focus on Celtic Christian Spirituality.

Andrew Dunn writes: “*The breadth of the interest in Celtic spirituality is surprising. People across the theological spectrum find elements in Celtic Christianity that attract them.*” Indeed, one of the features which is most attractive to me about Celtic Christianity is the way in which it can reach across many different groups within the church to draw them together in a common search for God and God’s mission in the world.

Just what is the attraction? Why are so many people interested in a way of being the church with is, at the same time, both ancient, and new? What gifts are here for you and me?

The first gift is to remind us of the closeness of God. For the Celtic people, God was present in every activity, in every word, in every breath. God is in the midst of the people, caring for the earth, caring for us, and all of the mundane details of our lives. In our reading from Acts, Paul says, “indeed God is not far from each one of us.” (Acts 17:27)

The Celtic understanding was that God’s presence was all pervading. Sacred and secular are not separate, for God’s presence is felt in every aspect of life. Esther De Waal in her book, Every Earthly Blessing, writes, “*This is an approach to life in which God breaks in on the ordinary, daily, mundane earthy. It is very much a down -to-earth spirituality. The sense of God informs daily life and transforms it, so that any moment, any object, any job of work, can become the time and the place for an encounter with God.*” (p. XV) It has been said that this spirituality listens for God in the heart of life. It is a thoroughly incarnational spirituality, for it is through God’s world, in its totality, however mundane, that God is revealed.

Prayer, therefore, becomes simply a part of the language of the day. Imagine starting your day this way:

A woman splashes her face with three palmfuls of water: The palmful of God of life. The palmful of the Christ of Love. The palmful of the Spirit of Peace. Triune of grace. Then as she makes her bed, she invokes God's presence again:

I make this bed
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,
In the name of the night we were conceived,
In the name of the night that we were born,
In the name of the day we were baptized,
In the name of each night, each day,
Each angel that is in the heaven.

(Hmm... I'm wondering if my children might make their beds more readily if such words accompanied the action????) And she hasn't even begun to make breakfast yet!

De Waal notes that prayers such as these, "*come from people for whom an active living faith was a positive factor in their daily life....They were the prayers of a people who are so busy from dawn to dusk, from dark to dark, that they have little time for long, formal prayers. Instead throughout the day they do whatever has to be done carefully, giving it their full attention, yet at the same time making it the occasion for prayer.*" (p. 4)

I don't know about you, but I can certainly relate to the "so busy from dawn to dusk, that they have little time for long, formal prayers." Here is a way of listening, of seeing with fresh imagination, of sensing with an open heart the signs of God's grace in every activity of life, from the most menial to the most challenging. Imagine what might it mean to go through each day, making every moment an occasion for acknowledging God's presence!

Accompanying the idea of God being close at hand, is that God is also to be known through the marvels of creation. God is not some distant being, who once created the earth and then left it alone. Rather, in the words of the Psalmist, in addressing God, "You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it." (Psalm 65:9)

The Celts had a relationship with the land. They understood the interconnectedness of all things. Monks and hermits lived in harmony with the land they inhabited. There was a sense of wonder in the power of the Creator, which we too, at least as young children, understand. Think about it. Many of our earliest memories are generally in wonder at the elements – listening to the waters of a river or ocean, lying in the grass, or watching sunlight through the leaves. Most of us, however, have little in our religious tradition to encourage us to do much more than simply offer thanks to God for creation. How many of us were taught to look for God within creation? How much more often were we led

to look at our spiritual life as somehow separate from the physical, created world?

Celtic Christians, have a relationship with the earth which has been lost in much of Western culture. We ignore that relationship at our own peril. For as De Waal writes, "A world which has lost its vision of the sacredness of creation has also lost its commitment to the dignity of human life." (p.70)

Think of the familiar Celtic cross – the great O of creation, or the circle of the world, and the cross – brought together in one whole. This embodies the Celtic way of seeing the world – all things being brought together – all things in relationship to one another.

There are many other gifts which come to us from the Celtic tradition: a strong sense of hospitality; the idea of anamchara, or "soul friend"; and an enthusiastic, exuberant, joyful faith –all of which are undoubtedly needed by the church – by us, today. Yet I would highlight one final gift: Celtic Christians both ancient and contemporary embrace all of life – both its pain and its joy. Life in all of its fullness – both blessings and tragedies are held within the hands of God, who took our suffering on the cross, and who walks with us still.

We're a mixed group here at Fairmount. I'm wonder, though, if some of you might be interested in exploring what it would mean to live so very aware of God's presence in your life? You've heard me mention small groups before – and I will dare to again – for those who are nurturing this kind of spiritual awareness today – whether in Iona, or Cleveland, are doing it with the support of others. Sunday, September 12th, at 9:30, we'll be exploring what small group options might be desired. Maybe this year, we'll know enough about Celtic spirituality to express an interest!

In days such as you and I live, in a world as fractured as ours, perhaps we need the sort of daily prayer that Alexander Carmichael recorded in 1866 from Mary McCrae, on the Isle of Harris. She was, he says, "a faithful servant and an admirable worker and danced at her leisure and caroled at her work." She prayed:

Christ with me sleeping
Christ with me waking,
Christ with me watching
Every day and night
Each day and night.
God with me protecting,
The Lord with me directing,
The Spirit with me strengthening,
For ever and for evermore. Amen.
Amen indeed.

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