

Chris Murphy

February 26, 2023

Scripture: John 15: 1-17

Sermon Title: Embracing the Sacred in All Things

Prayer...

Introduction:

We have entered the Season of Lent. This is a forty day period of spiritual formation as we prepare our hearts to rejoice again in the gift of Easter, the powerful story of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

How do you feel about the season of Lent? I will be honest that in the past I saw Lent as a more somber season. A time to challenge myself to look deeply at my sin and to feel guilty for the suffering of Jesus for me. I now see Lent quite differently. Jesus is no fan of guilt and shame. I believe Lent is best experienced as a season of great joy as we more deeply embrace God's love for us.

It is with this approach to Lent, that I invite you to go on a journey with me. I invite you to enjoy the Lenten Season by exploring with me the gift of Celtic Christianity.

To help us on our journey or pilgrimage with Celtic Christianity, I will be using the book Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul. This wonderful resource by John Philip Newell will introduce us to some of the values of Celtic Christian faith.

Before we get started, I need to share a brief story from my days as an Admission Counselor at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California. When I was in my thirties, I served as an Admissions Counselor with Fuller working with applicants to the Schools of Psychology, Theology, and Intercultural Studies. Fuller Seminary is an ethnically diverse community, and our Admissions staff reflected this diversity. My colleagues came from countries like the Philippines, Kenya, Jamaica, South Korea, Indonesia, China, and Russia. We also had staff that identified as African American, Latinx, and Asian American. To help us bond as a staff, we would have different types of training and devotions. One year, we decided to share as individuals our own ethnic identity stories. I realized at first that I felt inadequate to share my story because like many white people, I identified more as a

Caucasian American rather than as a person from Europe. As I worked on my presentation, I realized that I did find a sense of ethnic identity from being a person with an Irish, English, and Scottish heritage. The presentation went well and I realized that I did have an ethnic identity.

Fast forward a couple years and my wife Karen and I are going on a pilgrimage to Scotland with a group of mostly Episcopalian and Presbyterian friends from California. On this pilgrimage, I feel a special connection to God and my own ethnic heritage as we visit the Holy Isle of Iona. On your bulletin today, you can see an image of the Iona Abbey. This island is where the famous leader Colmba, a monk originally from Ireland came to start a monastic and missional community in 563 AD. As Karen and I enjoyed the beauty of the land on Iona, my heart sang and I experienced a deep spiritual energy with the land and with my own roots. Karen and I are hoping to visit the British Isles again this summer as well as Norway, where Karen's ancestors are from. I imagine we will experience this same awareness of God's presence through our ancestral lands.

I am sharing my experience of traveling in Europe because I realize more and more that the Christian tradition that informs my faith the most at this time in my life is Celtic Christianity. It is the form of Christianity that has deep roots in the British Isles. Whether or not you come from this part of the world, my hope is that the wisdom of the Celtic faith will be a blessing to all of us this Lenten Season. By the way, I do not think it is a coincidence that we have a Celtic Cross in the front of our sanctuary. The original of this very cross is from the Island of Iona and it came to our church in the early 1950's.

So before we explore Celtic Christianity, we need to know who are the Celts.

In the introduction to John Philip Newell's book, he describes them as a people group that are referenced as early as 500 B.C.E. The Greeks called this group the Keltoi people or Celts. The Romans referred to them as galli or Gaels. For people today, Celtic territory normally refers to Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall, but in 500 B.C.E the Celts were found in different parts of middle Europe, from as far as Turkey in the East and Spain in the west. The Celts were a loose group of tribes that shared a common culture and some similar language roots. The Celts were rural farmers, and the Celtic architecture showed a special connection to nature with its rounded and curved style. The Artwork of the Celts also showed a

special connection to nature. Rather than worshipping in large buildings, the Celtic people enjoyed worshipping in nature. Like Native Americans and other indigenous cultures, they saw the forests and the mountains as temples of worship more than buildings.

Christianity came to Celtic people within the first two centuries after Jesus' resurrection. The early Celtic Christians demonstrated some values that made them unique among other Christians in Europe.

John Philip Newell highlights that the key idea for Celts was that everything in the world was sacred. They showed a deep connection to God in nature and a more positive view of humanity as also deeply connected to God. For Celts, the world was not to be seen as bad or evil, but full of the beauty and goodness of God's presence. Everything was sacred.

I chose the passage of John chapter 15 today because it highlights Jesus' own understanding of the sacredness of life. Like the Celts, Jesus saw the sacredness of nature and used the image of the grape vine to help us understand our deep connection to God. Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." Jesus lived in an agricultural world like the Celts and he saw nature as a beautiful expression of how God relates to all of us. Like branches, we are to connect to the vine of Jesus' love and as we abide or remain connected to this love, we will flourish and bear fruit. The fruit of our lives will be love. The teaching of Jesus is rather simple. Stay connected to God who is the source of love and then receive love for yourself and share love with others. Jesus goes on to say that the disciples are his friends not simply servants. We too are called to be friends of Jesus as we share his love with the world around us. Like the disciples we are chosen to receive God's love and share God's love with a world in need.

Celtic Christianity historically has a special appreciation for John's Gospel in the Bible. The Celts appreciated the disciple John's emphasis on God's love and personal, relational nature of Jesus shown in John's Gospel. This is another reason I am using the Gospel of John chapter 15 to help introduce us to the Celtic tradition today.

Over the season of Lent, I will talk about Celt Christian faith and spirituality in four ways. We will some of the chapters from John Philip Newell's book and will connect his teachings to the wisdom of the Bible.

Next week, I will reflect on Newell's chapter entitled Sacred Soul. We will learn how one Celtic theologian named Pelagius taught that humanity is actually deeply good and beloved of God. We will explore the doctrine of original sin and the Celtic understanding of the goodness and beauty of creation as a deeper wisdom that honors the beauty and sacredness of humanity, while still recognizing that sin is a reality in our lives.

In two weeks, we will talk about Sacred Feminine. Using a portion of the book of Proverbs, I will explore that Celtic Christianity has a deeper awareness of the feminine nature of God and the way women demonstrate a special sacredness that has often been suppressed by more masculine styles of Christian faith leadership. Celtic Spirituality invites us to see humanity and nature as a blending of feminine and masculine energy that helps us also connect to the feminine and masculine presence of God.

The next sermon theme will be Sacred Song. David Chris will share more about how Celtic Christianity embraces music and the Arts as a special expression of worship. David and Esther Chris for years served as music ministry leaders in Korea and David will talk about what he has learned from leading music and how the Arts help us experience God, since God is an artist.

At the end of March, we will explore more deeply the Celtic love of nature with a sermon on Sacred Earth. Then on Palm Sunday, we will explore Sacred Compassion as we remember Jesus's suffering in Gethsemane.

On Easter Sunday, we will celebrated the Joyful resurrection of Jesus and remember that Jesus is Sacred and represents the eternal loving power of God revealed in human form. Jesus in the resurrection restores for us the deep wisdom that we all are children of God, born of God, and beloved of God.

I am so excited for this joyful season of lent. May we enjoy with wisdom of Christ revealed in the Celtic Christian tradition. May we embrace the truth that all of life is sacred to God and that the love of God is all around us and within us, revealed in the beauty of each other's faces, in the beauty of trees of the forest, and the

grapevines we see in the land surrounding Newberg. God is everywhere when we can see that the world is sacred to God. Remember we are never alone on this journey. Through one another and the beauty of nature around us, we can remember that Jesus abides with us and as we abide in him we will bear the fruit of God's love to the world.

Please pray with me...