

Chris Murphy
March 12th 2023
Scripture: Proverbs 9: 1-6
Sermon Title: Sacred Feminine

Prayer...

Introduction:

This morning we are continuing our sermon series on Celtic Christianity by exploring the topic of the Sacred Feminine. According to John Philip Newell's chapter on Sacred Feminine in his book Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul, the wisdom of Celtic faith remembers that within the matter of the universe is a conjoining of masculine and feminine energy.

When I think of feminine energy in the world, I am reminded of my favorite miracle story from our experience as a family.

(Story of Meeting Laurie Luyten – Midwife in Chino Ancient Paths

Midwifery and Family Birth Center- Cate first water birth, Chiara 500th waterbirth)

I am sharing the story of our midwife because in Celtic Spirituality the saint that may be the most cherished of all Celtic saints is the famous midwife Brigid of Kildare, who was born in 451 and lived until 523 A.D.

John Philip Newell describes Brigid as the saint “who loves the earth, who reveals the sacredness of the feminine, who models female leadership, inspires poets and musicians, midwives at new beginnings, and extravagantly embodies compassion and boundless generosity toward the poor and those who seek refuge.”

Since Brigid’s story was passed on orally and written a century after her death it is best to understand that the stories about her are full of myth and legend.

Newell describes the legend of Brigid by exploring how she represents a connection between pre-Christian and Christian wisdom, a connection of the human and the divine, and a connection of humanity with the earth. Lastly, Brigid represents the liminal space between the womb of the universe and what is coming into being. Liminal is a word that

means in between spaces and is part of a Celtic understanding of spirituality.

The legend of Saint Brigid includes that she was the midwife at the birth of Jesus. Somehow the Celtic imagination has no problem allowing a 5th century Saint to also be present at the birth of Jesus in the first century. Not only is Brigid the midwife for Mary when Jesus is born, but legend says that Brigid also becomes the wetnurse who breastfeeds the infant Jesus.

The 5th century Saint Brigid was said to be born to a Christian mother and a Druid father. Druids were the pre-Christian indigenous religious community of the Celtic people. One legend says that Brigid grew up on the island of Iona. The western islands of Scotland are called the Hebrides, the islands of Brigid.

In Ireland, it was told that Brigid originally was known as a Druidess. Druid means “Oak knower or bearer of oak wisdom.” She was the

leader of the Druidic community in Leinster. When Brigid made Christ her druid, she brought her entire community to become followers of Christ.

In Celtic imagination Brigid also seemed to embody the qualities of the ancient Goddess Brigid, the Goddess of grain within the Druid religion.

The druid community of Leinster used to keep a fire perpetually burning to remember the light that shines deep in all creation. After the community became Christian, the same practice was kept by the sisters of the community of Brigid. In Kildare in Ireland, a fire continued to be lit for one thousand years. In the 16th century, the Protestant reformers unfortunately sought to push down pre-Christian practices and put out the fire. Then the Celtic tradition moved into Irish homes. A perpetual fire began to burn in the hearths of Irish homes in memory of Brigid. By the way, the word Brigid means brightness.

One beautiful legend of Brigid involves her sitting with an Irish Prince, while he is dying. She desires to lead him to Christ, so she picks up some straw and weaves it into a four armed cross of reeds. She explains to

the prince that as the sun's light is not overcome by the darkness of winter, so Christ reveals the light that cannot be overcome by the darkness of death. The prince accepts an anointing of oil from Brigid, a sign of his openness to Christ, and then the prince dies in peace.

One title Brigid held was Abbess of Kildare. She had the authority of a bishop within her community. In Ireland, Brigid became one of the three patron Saints, that include also Saint Colomba and Saint Patrick. It is powerful to think how significant Brigid was as a leader of the church.

The ancient druid communities also gave women strong leadership within their communities and the early Celtic Christian community also gave significant reverence to female leadership.

In Brigid's leadership she also demonstrated great compassion. She was known for her care for the poor and for strangers. One legend even says she made water into beer to help throw a party for the poor during Easter Season. To me this sounds like the Irish version of Jesus turning water into wine.

Brigid is so revered among the Celts that Saint Brigid's feast day on Feb. 1st is one of the greatest celebrations of the Celtic year.

The story of Brigid reminds us that in Celtic Christianity there is great appreciation for the divine feminine. Brigid reminds us that Celtic people have historically related to God in feminine form as well as masculine form. The pre-Christian druid appreciation for the Goddess Brigid influenced the admiration for the Christian Saint Brigid, who also represented female leadership and the divine feminine being shown in human form.

Talking about God in a feminine way might seem like a stretch for most Christians today, but the Sacred feminine is woven into Celtic Christianity in a way that potentially can inspire our modern Christian experience.

Modern Biblical Scholars, church historians, and theologians, especially ones that are female, are reminding the church today that Christianity has a history of female leadership and wisdom. Saint Brigid is one

example of many. Our Scriptures also show women in leadership and even reflect on God in feminine ways.

In our text today from Proverbs 9, we read about Lady wisdom.

Wisdom, also known as Sophia is viewed by scholars to be a reflection of the Holy Spirit. She is described as one who welcomes the vulnerable into her home. She says, “You that are simple turn in here! To those without sense she says, ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live and walk in the way of insight.” Earlier in Proverbs, Lady Wisdom is said to be at the creation of the world, which reminds us that in the book of Genesis the Spirit that hovers over the waters is described as feminine.

The Bible has multiple places where God is described in feminine ways. God is described as a Mother Bear in the book of Hosea 12:8 and as a Mother Eagle in Deuteronomy 32:11 and 12. Jesus even talks about being like a Mother Hen in Matthew 23:37.

This morning we sang the song that Amy Grant made famous, El Shaddai. I wonder if you know that many Biblical Scholars now believe El Shaddai, which refers to God as God Almighty is also translated as either God of the mountains or God of the breasts. The image is of an almighty feminine God who provides for her creation the way of woman nurses her baby.

My question for us this morning as we are inspired by both Celtic Christianity and the story of Brigid and as we reflect on the feminine representation of God in Scripture, what is holding back the Church today from embracing God as both feminine and masculine in nature?

I still remember the first time I actually heard someone pray naturally to God as if she was a woman. I was in a meeting of Presbyterian leaders at a gathering in Louisville Kentucky. One woman was invited to provide an opening prayer and she referred to God as Mother God. I was both shocked and excited at the same time.

I think what is holding people back from embracing the Sacred feminine within our understanding of God is a mixture of habit, tradition, patriarchy, and fear. It is hard to talk about God in the feminine when so few churches seem comfortable with a female image of God. We like to believe our society and our church communities are honoring of women and men equally, but if we are honest, we know that patriarchy is still strong. Only since the 1970's have Presbyterians had female pastors and many denominations today still forbid women to be pastors. The Christian Church comfortably talks about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but we struggle to see God as Mother and the Holy Spirit as Lady Wisdom or feminine in nature. Anything that feels new is uncomfortable for some, but I think a lot of people like me are excited that a future church might follow the inspiration of Celtic Christianity, which is open to connecting to a God who is both feminine and masculine and a God who is deeply connected to nature.

I wish my two girls grew up in a church that sang songs about Mother God and Father God every Sunday rather than once in a while. I grew up singing El Shaddai, but I never knew I was singing about God in feminine form. I doubt Amy Grant knew what she was singing about either.

Hopefully she knows now.

The Sacred feminine is a beautiful expression of Celtic Christianity.

March is Women Awareness month and last Wednesday was

International Women's Day. I was reminded this week that one of our

mission partners, Caroline Kurtz, helps support women in the Maji

District of Ethiopia by helping them receive solar powered lamps so that the women can give birth at night and still have light.

I have another friend named Ceitci Demirkova who does mission work that helps girls in Bulgaria hear the Gospel and also stay safe from being sold into human trafficking. There are so many wonderful women in our world that need our appreciation, encouragement, and empowerment.

Friends, let us continue to be a church that empowers women by supporting missionaries like Caroline and Ceitci. Let us also dare to be a church that explores the feminine in God, so that we may fully believe the wisdom of the Bible and more fully be led by the Holy Spirit, who is Lady Wisdom.

John Philip Newell finishes his chapter on sacred wisdom with these words.

“St Brigid embodies the beauty and strength of the sacred feminine, which is deep within us all. Stories of her life call forth the dimension of the divine in us, that we may be strong again to serve the interrelationship of all things, within us, between us, and among us in this world.”

And now I will offer a Celtic Prayer of awareness adapted from one written by John Philip Newell. Let us pray...

Creator, Mother God,

Awaken us to our souls,

To the beauty of the divine deep within us.

And awaken us to our souls fragrance, in the body of the earth,

May we know its strength of attraction,

And receive the grace to heal what has been torn apart

Awake, O Our Souls,

To the beauty of the divine deep within us. AMEN

Proverbs 9:1-6

Wisdom's Feast

9 Wisdom has built her house;

she has hewn her seven pillars.

2 She has slaughtered her animals; she has mixed her wine;

she has also set her table.

3 She has sent out her female servants; she calls

from the highest places in the town,

4 "You who are simple, turn in here!"

To those without sense she says,

5 "Come, eat of my bread

and drink of the wine I have mixed.

6 Lay aside immaturity and live,

and walk in the way of insight."