

Chris Murphy

March 5th, 2023

Scripture: Genesis 1:26, 27, and 31

Sermon Title: Sacred Soul

Prayer...

Introduction:

This morning we are continuing our Lenten sermon series on Celtic Christianity by exploring the theme of Sacred Soul from John Philip Newell's book, Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul. The subtitle for this book is Celtic Wisdom for Reawakening to What Our Souls Know and Healing the World.

In the beginning of Newell's first chapter on Sacred Soul, he writes, "In Celtic wisdom we remember that our soul, the very heart of our being is sacred. What is the deepest in us is of God. Every child, every woman, every man, and every life form is in essence divine." (Read Twice)

As you hear Newell's statement that what is at the very heart of our being is sacred and is in essence divine, how does it make you feel?

Another way of saying the same thing is to say that in Celtic Christianity the perspective is that our deepest nature is in essence of God and therefore our deepest nature is love.

This means that You Are Love! I Am Love. We are Love. Our deepest essence and nature is love.

Imagine a church that raises young people to believe they are by nature good, loving, divine in essence. Now imagine this church teaches that people are called to be humble before God and also seek forgiveness for sin. Lastly, imagine a church that teaches people to go love the world born out of the love we receive from God and born out of a reawakening that our own divine nature is love.

My suggestion for us today is that Celtic Christianity imagines a church with this approach. The Celtic faith invites us to believe that everything is sacred including ourselves.

In Genesis 1. 26-27, 31- we read that God creates humankind in God's image, male and female. Humankind is then called to take care of creation including animals and plant life. God calls all her creation good. Here we find the Biblical foundation for believing that humankind is in essence divine. Here we learn that we have quite a bit in common with God, especially when we demonstrate love and care for creation. Rather than giving us a spirit of pride, too me this revelation gives us a deep sense of gratitude and humility to know that God loves us so much that God created us in his image.

In John Philip Newell's chapter on Sacred Soul, he helps talk about the Celtic understanding of Sacred Soul by telling the story of a Celtic monk from Wales named Pelagius, who lived from 360-430 AD.

Newell writes that Pelagius taught that when you look into the face of a newborn you look into the "face of God freshly born among us."

Pelagius taught us about the dignity of our human nature. He put the emphasis on sacredness over sinfulness. Pelagius explains that though

our inner nature is of God that our “inner nobility” can be buried or covered up by a falseness. Deep down we remain in our sacred essence divine, but we need divine grace to help restore us to our deepest nature.

Pelagius reflects on three types of grace. The first he calls the grace of nature or original grace. This type of grace refers to the idea that all of life is a gift of grace. Every moment, waking and loving, the simple experiences of life are sheer grace. And in the beginning of the world there was an original grace that is at the heart of God’s creation. The second form of grace is the grace of illumination. Sometimes we forget how to see life clearly and need to be reawakened to the gift that is life. The grace of illumination from God opens us to what is true. The third form of grace is the grace of forgiveness. When we fail or hurt another, we need forgiveness to bring healing and wholeness to our hearts and to the hearts of others.

Pelagius is an icon among Celtic teachers for his wisdom on the sacredness of humanity. During his life he faced opposition from Augustine of Hippo who accused Pelagius of believing that salvation was not a gift of grace. Augustine taught the doctrine of original sin, which suggests that after the fall of Adam and Eve, all of humanity was tainted with a deep sinful nature. Pelagius disagreed with the doctrine of original sin and suggested that sin did not fully taint the essence of human nature, which remains deeply connected to God's heart.

Pelagius understood that grace was deeply experienced through the salvation offered in Jesus. The difference for Pelagius was that he taught that humanity remains in essence sacred even when sin brings a sense of lostness or confusion to our lives.

Augustine eventually succeeded in excommunicating Pelagius from the Catholic Church. This was a great tragedy for the church. Most seminarians today are taught to be concerned about the teaching of Pelagius because he was excommunicated, but the ideas of Pelagius

continue to be revered by many who treasure Celtic Christian faith. John Philip Newell reminds us of the wisdom of this Celtic saint and how we all can benefit from a more positive view of human nature.

Friends, one of my motivations for teaching about Celtic Christianity and Celtic Spirituality is that I worry that many Christians today suffer from a poor self-image born out of a theology that emphasizes human sinfulness over against human goodness. The reality is that we are deeply good and also vulnerable to sin. We can both embrace our sacredness, while acknowledging we need a Savior who offers us daily grace. We do not earn by our own merit or good actions God's grace or salvation, but we are natural recipients of God's grace because we are deeply loved by God. And as the Spirituality writer Brennan Manning once said, God not only loves you, but God also likes you. We are likable and lovable to God. We are viewed by God as deeply good and worthy of love not because we earn love by right actions all the time, but because we are lovable to a God who made us.

Friends, when you look inside yourself to your deepest sense of self, do you feel you are good or bad? Do you feel you are lovable? There is no judgement if you feel you are bad or more sinful than good. Sadly, I think many churches have unfortunately taught us this idea. The truth however is that you are deeply good and lovable. Yes, we are all vulnerable to sin, but may I suggest our deepest nature is love. Our deepest nature is divine. If you are like me, this insight is life changing. Knowing that we are by nature good, created in God's image actually gives us the original grace to believe that we can bring our vulnerable and yes at times sinful lives before a God who will never condemn us and who always offer us the gift of forgiveness.

Is this not the great wisdom of Lent? In this season of purification, we hear the message like Jesus that we are God's beloved children and born out of this truth, we let go of habits that are harmful to us. Only through the truth of God's love for us, may we freely let go of that which hinders us to fully love ourselves and others.

May this be a season to reawaken to the truth of our divine nature of love. May this be a season of freedom and wholeness and great joy through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is sovereign, God is good, and created humankind in God's image. Let us celebrate our identity as beloved children of God. God is love. You are love. We are love.

In the Name of the Holy Trinity, AMEN

Genesis 1: 26-27, 31

26 Then God said, “Let us make humans[a] in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth[b] and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

27 So God created humans[c] in his image,
in the image of God he created them;[d]
male and female he created them....

31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.
And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.