

Sermon for Oct 10 2010

This morning, I would like to share with you a spiritual path that developed in the lands of my ethnic origins along the western edges of the Roman Empire. Very much like the lone Samaritan, an outcast among Jews of Jesus' day who was the only one to say thank you for healing, so I think of Celtic spirituality... always on the fringe of Christianity, continuing to offer a model for our Episcopal Church today.

Next week we will celebrate our roots in the Episcopal Church of Scotland which had its roots in Celtic Christianity. Who were these Celts and what did they believe? Greeks and Romans called the peoples to the west, Celts. Celtic spirituality flourished until the 7th century when the Roman Catholicism forced it underground for over a thousand years. It was not until 18th century that the term was used to identify seven languages belonging to a distinctive "Celtic" family (Irish, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Manx, Cornish, and Breton as well as Gaulish).

The roots of Celtic spirituality are in Scripture known as (the Little Book) and Creation known (the Great Book). As J. Phillip Newell writes in *Echo of the Soul*, Celtic spirituality calls us to listen for intimations of the divine deep within all that has been created. "The human body is a sacred text within the larger text of creation

The essence of Celtic spirituality is to be able to see God as "the Life of the world and not merely some religious aspect of it. To listen to God is to listen deep within ourselves, including deep within the collective life and consciousness of the world." The image of God is in all people not just the baptized or the chosen. However, because Celtic tradition challenged the boundaries of religious orthodoxy, it was continuously pushed to the edges of Christianity and that is where it remained.

Celtic spirituality has roots in the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, especially in the mysticism of that tradition. Some of its main features bear a family likeness to later Jewish mysticism, which is also was rooted in the Old Testament's wisdom tradition. Kabbalah, which

means 'receiving', is a tradition of Jewish mysticism that emerged in medieval Europe. Kabbalistic tradition is attentive to Scripture, to creation and to the human body.

Scholars are now examining the books that did not make it into the New Testament. One is *The Acts of John*, a document from the second century. J Phillip Newell, poet, scholar, and teacher, Canadian and formerly Warden of Iona Abbey, Scotland, offers this description of Jesus at the Last Supper from the *Acts of John*: "Jesus invites his disciples to form a circle, and then they begin a simple Hebrew circle dance together. Jesus stands in the middle of the circle and says, 'I will pipe, dance all of you!...I will mourn, lament all of you!'" His words point to the dance of life. They point also to the brokenness of the dance and to the sufferings that disharmony brings. 'The whole of the universe takes part in the dance,' he says. Jesus is speaking of a harmony at the heart of life."

In Celtic spirituality, Christ is viewed as leading us into a renewed relationship with what may be called the Ground of Life or the One from whom all things come. Newell points out that the "Celtic tradition offers insights and spiritual practices that remind us of the Unity and that further nourishes the longing for peace that is stirring among us

Newell asserts that the "doctrine of original sin, so dominant in Christian thought, has fed discord within us and between us.... It has given us the impression that what is deepest in the human soul is essentially opposed to God. The traditional answer has therefore has been that our essence needs to be changed, which in turn puts us at odds with the rest of humanity and the rest of the created order."

There is a Celtic belief that the universe comes out of the womb of the Eternal. Newell describes the Genesis story as pointing to the ever-unfolding mystery of life rather than an event that occurred in the distant past. From the Celtic view the matter of Creation is a "holy and living energy born from the hidden depths of God." Thus, the universe is a single organism. Creation comes out of God.

The first known Celtic theologian was the Irishman, Pelagius. As Newell points out, generations of theology students, including your preacher this morning, were taught that Pelagius taught a dangerous heresy that we could save ourselves. Besides seeing God in all of creation, he challenged the Church to do justice. Pelagius said that “a person who is rich and yet refuses to give food to the hungry may cause far more deaths than even the cruelest murderer.”

Pelagius also taught women to read Scripture and interpret Scripture. Around the year 414, he wrote a public letter to a young woman named Demetrias from a leading Roman family living in Palestine in relation to her vocation to a life of prayer. In his letter, he invites her to ‘approach the secret places of her soul’ and to be attentive to the ‘inner teaching’ regarding her essential goodness and what she should do.

Pelagius also wrote in his letters that “Jesus does not invite people to become his disciples for his own benefit, but to teach and guide them in the ways of goodness. And if a person can walk along that way without ever knowing the earthly Jesus, then we may say that he is following the spirit of Christ in his heart.” After being charged with heresy by Augustine and others, the Pope refused to condemn him until they secured a imperial edict of condemnation. Pelagius was banished from Rome and in 418 excommunicated.

St. Patrick is the best known of the Celtic saints. The genius of Patrick and others of the fifth century was in incorporating the nature mysticism of the Druidic religion with the Gospel. Consequently we find no Celtic martyrs of the faith. St. Brigid, second only to Patrick and seen as the mother saint of Ireland, was the Abbess of Kildare, a Celtic religious community of men and women.

During the 6th and 7th centuries there was a growing emphasis on the goodness of creation. Clergy were still permitted to marry, the distinction between religious and lay was not hard and fast, and women held positions of leadership in the Church. However, with the Synod of Whitby in 664, the Celtic mission was replaced by the Roman mission of strict order and control. With the death of the last independent Abbot of Iona in 860 the Celtic mission went underground for over a thousand years.

Iona is known as the place where the Book of Kells was written, perhaps the most famous illustrated manuscript of the Gospels begun around 800 by monks of Iona. As Newell writes, “Celtic art’s ‘everlasting patterns’ as it has come to be known, was used to suggest the eternal interweaving of heaven and earth, time and eternity—the immediacy of God in all created life.

At a recent retreat that the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr gave on the Scottish island of Iona, which was the center point for the diffusion of Celtic Christianity, they remarked how often the Celtic "knot" was found on crosses, gravestones, in manuscripts, and on jewelry. It was apparently their artistic way of saying that all is connected, everything belongs, and all is one in God. They knew about ecosystems long before we did, but in an even larger way. ALL was held together inside of the divine knot. T.S. Eliot ends his famous "Four Quartets" quoting Dame Julian, and saying the same: “And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well / When the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire.”