

The Celtic Way: Where the Spiritual and the Material are Interrelated

Job 12:7-10 Romans 1:20a
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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There's a saying that everything old is new again. History does often seem to repeat itself. But it may seem to be an odd thing for progressive Christianity to embrace, given its efforts to rescue Christianity from the engrained dogma of the past. We *don't* really want everything old to be new again.

Strangely, however, if you go back far enough, especially before Christian doctrines and practices became thoroughly institutionalized and imperialized, you will find a wealth of theology and spirituality that progressives can indeed embrace. That's been the experience of many (including several here at College Hill who are part of our Celtic Circle small group) when looking at the particular ancient Celtic influences on Christianity. It must be stated, however, that most historians now believe there was no unified and identifiable entity entirely separate from the mainstream of Western Roman Catholicism. In other words, **there was not a Celtic Church opposed to the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, simply being so far away from the power center of Rome and the direct influence of the popes, the isolated Christianity in the British Isles** (especially in Ireland – once known as the edge of the known world) **took on forms that incorporated some of the customs, practices, and even beliefs of the local inhabitants**, who were led by spiritual leaders called Druids.

The form of Christianity that started developing around the 4th-9th centuries in Ireland (which it is important to note was never part of the Roman Empire) was thought to be less authoritarian than its Roman-influenced counterpart. It was believed to be more connected and in tune with nature and the earth, more comfortable dealing with the pre-Christian traditions of its inhabitants, and friendlier to women, who in turn had more say in church governance.

With that bit of background, what is it about the Celtic tradition, especially its approach to spirituality, to connecting with the Divine, that is resonating in such profound ways with so many of us progressives? Let's start with an understanding of our basic humanity. **Are human beings inherently bad, or are we inherently good?** When the Roman church solidified its power and authority, it leaned heavily on the teachings of 4th century theologian St. Augustine. **One of the hallmarks of Augustine's theology was the concept of original sin.** This doctrine is still highly influential in modern Christianity, as it was in the theology of John Calvin during the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago in central Europe, to which we Presbyterians trace our roots. Celtic historian and former dean of the Iona Abbey in Scotland, John Philip Newell, writes in his 1997 book, *Listening For the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*:

Augustine's thinking and the developing spirituality of the Church in the Roman world accentuated the evil in humanity and our essential unrighteousness.

He stated that the human child is born depraved and humanity's sinful nature has been sexually transmitted from one generation to the next, stretching from Adam to the present.

Augustine believed that from conception and birth we lack the image of God until it is restored in the sacrament of baptism..." [conveniently a function of the Church]. This understanding developed a spirituality that accentuated a division between the Church, which was seen as holy, on the one hand, and the life of the world, perceived as godless, on the other.

Rejecting the doctrine of original sin, however, as many of us have, is not a modern phenomenon. In fact, other theologians criticized it immediately – but were later then silenced. None was as influential as a **British-born 4th century theologian named Pelagius**. He maintained, as Newell writes, **"the image of God can be seen in every newborn child and that, although obscured by sin, it exists at the heart of every person, waiting to be released through the grace of God."** The Celtic Church firmly believed that God is at the heart of all life and within all people. This later developed into a spiritual understanding that **we can look to God's good creation just as we look to the Scriptures to hear and receive the living Word of God**. It was said that God can be revealed in two books. The book called the Bible, and the book of creation. As you've heard it described before in the term **"thin place,"** the Celtic understanding was that there was **very little to no distance between the spiritual and the material. Celtic spirituality, therefore, can be characterized by seeking the Sacred Presence of the Divine within all things.**

The ancient Church based in Rome, however, felt threatened by this affront to their power and authority, and hence sought to squelch the Celtic influence. They did a very effective job doing just that, as did the later Protestant reformers. In fact, after moving to Rome and defending his position, Pelagius was put on trial as a heretic, was found guilty, and later excommunicated.

Think now, for a moment, of the implications of the Celtic understanding of the relationship between God and humanity. **Deeper than any wrong is us, deeper than our sinfulness, is the light of God – that divine spark of God's image that has been present in all things since the very beginning of creation itself.** Theological concepts such as **redemption**, for example, "can be understood in terms of **a setting free, a releasing of what we essentially are**. Our goodness is sometimes so deeply buried as to be lost or erased, but it is there, having been planted by God, and awaits its release. For Pelagius, the redemption that Christ brings is such a liberation, a freeing of the good that is in us, indeed at the very heart of life."

Releasing what is fundamentally within each and every one of us is a monumentally different approach than what the Church has traditionally taught, that our human nature has to be replaced from without. Newell explains it this way:

In the early stream of Celtic spirituality, **God's gift of grace is regarded not as planting something totally new in essentially bad soil, but as bringing out or releasing the goodness which is present in the soil of human life but obstructed by evil.**

Grace is seen as enabling our nature to flourish, as co-operating with the light that is within every person. Thus many of the [Celtic] prayers for grace ask for the development of aspects of our essential, God-given nature. Those **prayers for grace ask for the restoration of what is at the core of our being.**

Newell goes on to state in his 1999 book, *The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality*, "The extent to which we fail to reflect the image of God in our lives is the extent to which we have become less than truly human." I encourage you, therefore, to **look for the image of the Divine deep within yourself, within your neighbor, and yes, that means within those with whom you seem to have very little in common – theologically, politically, racially, culturally, whatever.**

This historically Celtic approach to spirituality should also inform our own practice of ministry and mission – a ministry that seeks to liberate and free the goodness of God that is *already* at the very heart of all life. **Our role as the church, therefore, becomes one of working to help liberate rather than acting as the custodian of salvation, which is steeped in spiritual arrogance and issues of power and control.** And let us not forget that the opportunity to sense the Sacred Presence extends to all of God's creation. That's why there is such a strong bond with nature within the Celtic tradition. Not surprisingly, that strong bond is a basic characteristic of most indigenous people's spirituality, like Native American spirituality.

If I were to summarize the Celtic way of life and faith in a nutshell it would be this, paraphrasing the words of John Philip Newell in his 2008 book, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*:

What is deepest in us, and in all created things, is not opposed to God, rather it is of God.

Understanding that a Sacred Presence is intricately and mysteriously interwoven into all life and matter will transform your approach to life: to relationships, to ministry efforts, to stewardship, and to connecting with a very real sense of God's Presence. I encourage you to look for God's Presence and grace among and within you as you go about every activity in your life, including the seemingly mundane tasks of ordinary everyday life. Look for God's Presence in the interconnectedness, the sacredness, and the beauty of all of creation. Look for it within the different seasons of year. Look for it within the different seasons of your life. **Reject any doctrine that seeks to separate the spiritual from the material.** Remember, or learn for the first time, that **creation does not come out of nothing. It comes out of God! God's grace, therefore, as we understand it as expressed through Christ, is given to reconnect us to our nature, not to save us from our nature.**

You carry that Sacred Presence of the Divine deep within the core of your being. We all do. That is the Celtic way.

Amen.

Resources:

John Philip Newell:

Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation, 2008.

Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality, 1997.

The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality, 1999.



Approaching Iona Abbey, Scotland, by ferry
Photo by Rev. Todd Freeman, 5-16-15