

THIN AND THICK

October 1, 2017

World Communion Sunday

Celtic Heritage

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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa

Text: Philippians 2:1-13

SCRIPTURE

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

SERMON

Since this is the first Sunday in October many churches are celebrating World Communion Sunday. We certainly do appreciate taking a day to contemplate the amazing miracle that on any given Sunday, the followers of Jesus Christ all around the world, in hundreds of languages and with a wide variety of traditions, we all break bread and say, “This is my Body, broken for you.” And we share a cup and say, “This is the Blood of the Covenant poured out for the forgiveness of sins.”

But World Communion Sunday is also a Sunday to celebrate the rich diversity that makes up Christ’s Church. So it is entirely fitting that on this Sunday we celebrate our heritage as Presbyterians. As most of you probably know, it was Scottish immigrants who brought the Presbyterian church to America. While our origins go back 500 years to the Reformation, specifically the branch begun by John Calvin in Switzerland and then by John Knox in Scotland, there is no question that we were also influenced by Celtic Christianity and culture. The most obvious example is through music as many of the tunes found in our hymnal come directly from the songs of the Scots, Irish, Welsh and Cornish. We are singing a number of those hymns this morning.

However, Celtic spirituality which led to Celtic Christianity is a very subtle but important part of who we are. One component of the Celtic tradition is that you cannot separate the physical from the spiritual. In contrast, the Greek philosophers, particularly Plato and Socrates, believed that

the physical world, what you can see and touch and taste and smell, is but a dingy shadow of a higher spiritual reality. Therefore, according to these Greek thinkers the physical is suspect if not outright evil. Celtic traditions saw the physical and spiritual as all part of one whole. In Celtic Christianity you cannot experience God apart from God's creation. God made all things and called them all good, so we should never dismiss or abuse anything God created, whether we are talking about our fellow human beings or something slimy that grows off in a boggy swamp. This is why Celtic people, and Presbyterians as well, are environmentalists, working hard to be good stewards of God's creation.

In Celtic thought it is almost as if the physical world is a container that holds the spiritual, much like the way a cup holds a drink of water. The water does not change regardless of the container, and is not the same as the container, but the water has the shape of whatever container it might be in. Related to this is the idea of what the Celts call "thin places." These are places where they regard the boundary between the physical and the spiritual as being very thin. As a result, when you are in such a place it is both a spiritual and physical experience at the same time. It is almost like a container that is so thin, you get wet from the water inside when you touch it. One such thin place is the Isle of Iona, a tiny island off the western coast of Scotland. Tradition says that St. Columba came to the island in 563 with twelve other Irish monks. They built a monastery there, and it became their home base to spread out and bring Christianity to all of Scotland. Columba is to Scotland as Patrick is to Ireland. But Columba had his own approach to evangelism. First he put a high emphasis on education and being able to read the Bible for yourself. So they went out and built schools as well as churches. To this day we Presbyterians stress education and Bible study. But the second thing that Columba did was that when he sent out his disciples two by two into the Scottish Highlands, he insisted that they take their time and get to know the people first. Once they earned the right to be heard, then they could share with them the good news of God's love through Jesus Christ.

Down through the centuries the monastery on Iona had some good times and then some hard times. For a long time, it was an educational and spiritual center, with a large library of books and manuscripts. But as the Reformation, wars and political upheaval followed by the industrial revolution all came about, eventually it was abandoned and fell into ruin. However, in the last 80 years or so there has been a reawakening at Iona and once again it has become a center of Christian worship and spirituality.

This great transformation came about through a man named George MacLeod. Officially he was Baron MacLeod of Fuinary, the oldest son of a Scottish noble family. Coming from aristocracy he served as a captain in the Argyll Highlander Regiment of the British army during World War I. He was in the thick of some of the fiercest fighting and it was there that he began to question the class system of Great Britain. It was obvious to him that it did not matter if you were from the slums of the city or high born in the royal family, all suffered, bled and died the same in the trench warfare of no man's land.

Because of these experiences, when he returned home after the war, he studied theology rather than going into business or politics. George MacLeod was ordained a pastor in the Church of Scotland. His first call was a church in Govan, a poor neighborhood in Glasgow, where most earned a meager living doing back breaking work in the shipyards along the river Clyde. When

the depression hit, everyone was out of work and conditions went from bad to horrendous. As the parish pastor, MacLeod was deeply involved in the life of the people. One story goes that he was called to the hospital for a young man who was to die of malnutrition. When the body was examined it was discovered that he had been eating grass and leaves just to fill his stomach with something. Because of incidents like this, MacLeod felt that the church needed to do something to work for justice and relieve the suffering of those who needed it so much.

MacLeod felt that a big problem was that the pastors in the Church of Scotland were out of touch with the people they were called to serve. Now, as a boy, he had spent some of his summer vacations on the Isle of Iona. He came up with the idea that he would take a group of seminary students and a group of common laborers and they would spend some time working together to repair the ruined old abbey on the island. He meant to do it for only one summer, but this group of men developed some strong bonds between them and wanted to come back the following year. Over the next few years the group struggled. Some dropped out, but others joined, and many wanted to remain year round. Soon, out in this remote location, a Christian community was formed.

Today Iona is an ecumenical Christian community of men and women from different walks of life and different Christian traditions. They are committed to work for peace and social justice, the rebuilding of life together and the renewal of worship. It is a worldwide organization, with around 3,500 members, associates and friends. In recent years they have done a lot of work on music and worship, publishing resources for Christians everywhere. All of the liturgy this morning is from the *Iona Abbey Worship Book*.

But the Isle of Iona has once again become a thin place. Thousands come every year to spend time in prayer and contemplation. One of the spiritual practices is to take a daylong pilgrimage and walk around the entire island. When the pilgrims stop at an old quarry, they are asked to reflect on the work God has given us to do and what it means to be disciplined and faithful. When they come down to the beach they are to carefully select two small stones. One is to represent the things in their lives that they would like to get rid of. That stone is tossed into the waves. The other stone is what they value and is worth taking along on the journey of life. They are to carry this stone for the rest of the walk, or for as long as they want to. When the pilgrims open and shut a gate to walk through a pasture of sheep, they are to consider what they are opening up to and what they are shutting out in their lives. Eventually they end up back at the beautiful reconstructed Abbey, where they celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. But their whole day has been a spiritual act of worship as well as a physical hike that has taken them through God's creation. They discover that boundary between the spiritual and the physical has indeed grown very thin.

I thought about all this as I reflected on our scripture for this morning. It is the epistle reading from this week's lectionary, and in this selection we can see a number of ideas found in Celtic Christianity. I thought of George MacLeod, born of aristocracy but working with the poor in Glasgow when I read the words, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Now, certainly it is a very human tendency to be proud and self-centered, but in our Celtic and Presbyterian traditions we try very hard to push back against this. In our

worship service this morning we demonstrate this belief in two very concrete ways. The first you saw in our procession when we entered the sanctuary. After our piper Glenn Chatfield entered, elder Charley Knudsen walked in first carrying the Bible. This is a common practice on Sunday mornings in churches in Scotland. The purpose is to show that the Word of God comes before the man or woman of God. What the Bible says is much more important than what Pastor Beth or I might say.

But another way we try to show the humility that Paul is talking about will be seen in a few minutes when we serve communion. There is a deliberate reason why we bring the trays to you in the pews. It is so we all can serve one another. Someone passes you a tray and you hold it while they take the bread and cup. You then pass it to the person on the other side and they hold it while you take the bread and cup. Everyone serves and everyone is served. At the Table, nothing is to be done from selfish ambition or conceit. We are not to look to our own interests but to the interest of others.

But it was while reading the last part of our text, which many scholars believe is a very ancient Christian hymn, that I started thinking about the thin places in Celtic traditions. It was when we sinned and turned away from God that the barrier between the physical and the spiritual became thick and impenetrable for us. There was nothing we could do to break through. This ancient poem describes then what God in Christ decided to do. Paul says we should go beyond just thinking of others. We need to think the same way that Christ Jesus thought, when he did not regard being one with God as something to use for his own advantage. Instead he emptied himself of everything except love, broke through the barrier, entered into this world and died a terrible death on a cross. He then rose from the dead, and God has raised him up to glory. Since then, all the world has become a thin place.

On this World Communion Sunday, every spot on this earth becomes a thin place when the bread is broken and the cup is shared. It is a very physical act. We break and pour and serve. We see and touch and taste. We chew and swallow. Our eyes and hands and mouths are involved. But at the same moment it is one of the most spiritual things we can do as followers of Jesus Christ. It touches our very souls as once again we go to the cross, where through the great love of Christ, the barrier is shattered. We are forgiven. We are healed. We are made whole. It is both a physical and a spiritual experience at the same moment, and we are able to truly worship. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.