

# AN IRISH BLESSING

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Text: Acts 16:9-15

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## SCRIPTURE

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### Acts 16:9-15

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

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## SERMON

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Today is St. Patrick's day, of course, when everyone claims to be Irish, whether they are or not. But there is a lot to admire about the Irish people, their strength, their love of life, their music and dance. One of the things I like about the Irish are their traditional blessings that are often used as toasts as well. There is the famous blessing that you see on posters and plaques that goes,

"May the road rise to meet you; may the wind be ever at your back.

May the sun shine warm upon your face, and the rains fall soft upon your fields.

And until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand."

That is beautiful, isn't it? Some Irish blessings show a bit more of their sense of humor. There is the one that goes: "As you slide down the banisters of life may the splinters never point the wrong way." I like the blessing that seems very pragmatic:

"May those that love us, love us.

And, those that don't love us, May God turn their hearts.

And, if He doesn't turn their hearts,

May He turn their ankles... So, we will know them by their limping."

I have always liked these blessings and so a few years ago I decided I would write my own ancient traditional Irish blessings. It is not that hard to do, and you should try it sometime. The trick is to have some kind of pattern, say something one way and then say the opposite and then have a line that ties it all together. So, here is an ancient Irish blessing that I made up:

"May your joys and laughter be many.

May your grief and tears be few.

May there always be good food on your table,

And may you always have in your pocket at least a dollar more than your bar bill."

Sometimes the pattern doesn't have to be opposites, but follow a progression. Here is an ancient Irish blessing that I made up after spending a little time with my granddaughters: "May your grandchildren sing to their grandchildren the same songs your grandfather sang to you." It is a nice thought, isn't it? But here is an ancient Irish blessing that I made up, that as your pastor I would wish for each one of you: "

May the good Lord smile every time he thinks of you.

May the Devil keep on forgetting your address.

May your acts of kindness and mercy be lavish and long remembered.

May your sins and mistakes be few and quickly forgotten.

And at your funeral may the minister have a hard time holding back the tears when talking about you."

Now, yes, I am having a little fun with this, but the true origins of Irish blessings go back around 1500 years, to the man we are celebrating today. There are many legends and traditions surrounding St. Patrick, but he was an actual historical church leader who was born to an aristocratic family living in what is today northern England sometime around the year 400. Patrick's grandfather was a Christian priest and his father was a deacon, but he was a bit of a rebel, who ridiculed the local clergy and, as he would later write, he lived as an "alienated" and "ungoverned" youth.

When he was 16, his life changed dramatically. He was captured by Celtic sea raiders who brought him to Ireland and sold him as a slave to a tribal chieftain. He was sent off into the remote countryside to herd sheep. It was lonely dangerous work, and he was given few supplies of either food or clothing to survive on those desolate, windswept Irish hillsides. In his misery and isolation, he began to pray to the God he had previously ignored. Over time, without any outside help, Patrick became closer and closer to the God he had heard about when he was a child. It would also appear that he began to identify more and more with his captors. He learned their language and came to appreciate much about their culture and their perspective on life.

After six years of captivity, Patrick had a dream one night and in this dream a voice said to him, "A ship is ready to take you home." He woke the next morning, walked 200 miles to the seacoast and managed to negotiate his way on to a ship, which took him to what is today France. Eventually he made it back to his home to England.

His faith continued to grow and he began to study for the priesthood. A few years went by and he had another dream and in it a man appeared carrying a stack of letters, each one labeled with the words, "The Voice of Ireland." As Patrick opened and read each letter, they were all the same. They said, "We beg you, holy youth, come and walk among us again."

Patrick awoke and interpreted this dream as his own "Macedonian call" much like the dream that the Apostle Paul had in our scripture lesson this morning. Patrick believed that God was calling him to return to the very people who had enslaved him, and to tell them of the good news of Jesus Christ. He asked for permission from his church superiors to return to Ireland, and at first they were very much opposed to the idea.

Up until this point, very few had tried to take Christianity beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. Very little was known about the Irish, other than they supposedly practiced human sacrifice, and were fierce warriors, carrying around the heads of their enemies they had defeated in battle. Church officials regarded the Irish as ignorant savages that did not have the intelligence to understand Christianity.

But while the Roman church knew little about the Irish Celtic people, Patrick had lived among them, spoke their language and understood a great deal about their culture. And even though he had been brutally treated by his captors, God had kindled within him a burning desire to bring to these people a new hope and a new future. Eventually he was able to convince his superiors to let him go and see what he might be able to accomplish among these so called barbarians.

Now, at the time Christianity had been the official religion of the Roman Empire for over a 100 years. Anyone planting churches in remote areas of the Empire could expect protection and support from the Roman authorities. Patrick had no such assistance in Ireland. So while he preached about the love and mercy of the Triune God, he respected the Celtic culture and the way they looked at the world. The Celts regarded the spiritual and physical as part of the whole and therefore the sacred could be found in the commonplace things of everyday life.

Out of this perspective Patrick would often pray for the ordinary people in their daily routine. He was known to pray for God to bless a river so that the people could catch more fish. Or pray for a well to bring health to a community, or for the lambs born to a flock to be strong and fit. Some of this thinking may be at the root of the legend that he used the shamrock to explain the Trinity, a common leaf trampled underfoot could be a symbol of the sacred mystery of the Triune God.

But while Patrick respected the Irish culture he also challenged the status quo, particularly in three areas. Having been a slave himself, he was one of the first Christian leaders to speak out against slavery. Within a generation after Patrick's arrival the slave trade disappeared in Ireland. He also had a high view of women and as he made converts and expanded his followers both men and women served side by side in leadership roles.

In the centuries to come this would eventually create a tension between Celtic Christianity and Roman Christianity. Finally, Patrick valued education and wherever he planted a church he also started a school. As a result, Irish monasteries were eventually to become centers of learning and literature. And the Irish love of stories and clever words and witticism, probably traces its roots to Patrick's emphasis on education.

Above all else, Patrick loved and valued people, and worked diligently to connect with them in a personal meaningful way; to understand who they were, their wants, their needs, their daily struggles. He did all he could to be a blessing to them and in some way make their lives better. His strategy worked, and scholars estimate that by the end of his life there were over 700 churches or monastic communities in Ireland. Before long Irish missionaries had spread all over the British Isles, including the most remote regions of Scotland and Wales, converting many to Christianity by using Patrick's methods.

While Patrick may have been radical in comparison to the church leaders of his time, he actually was following a pattern set down by the very first Christian missionary, the Apostle Paul. We see this in our scripture lesson for this morning from the book of Acts. I already mentioned Paul's dream where he saw a man from Macedonia urging Paul to "come over and help us." Now, Paul going to Macedonia was a big deal, on a par with Patrick going to Ireland. Paul was in what is today Turkey, but more significantly, it is on the continent of Asia. Macedonia was what is today Greece, a part of Europe. While both regions were under the Roman Empire at the time, there were massive cultural and philosophical differences between the people of the Middle East and those of Europe. But Paul was willing to take the risk and go beyond the boundaries of what everyone thought was reasonable.

So what strategy did Paul use when he arrived in the city of Philippi in the territory of Macedonia? Just as Patrick was to do later on, he loved and valued people and did all he could to connect with them in a meaningful way. How do I know that? We are told of the connection he made with one particular woman. We are given her name and occupation. Her name was Lydia and she was a dealer in purple cloth. She ran a fabric shop with high end material for sale. If you read the whole book of Acts, you will find that Paul established churches in many cities. He did this over and over again. But you are not often given the names of those Paul initially connected with. But here in Philippi, we are told about Lydia and how the church in Philippi began with her. She is a real person, a particular individual that mattered to Paul.

So what difference does this all make to us today? Well, often when we think about spiritual giants like Patrick and Paul, we admire them and think what they did was great. But we also think that it is flat out impossible for anyone to do anything like that today. For most of us, there is no way that we could bring about such an incredible change in our community, or even in the lives of any particular individual. But then I thought of a little book we all studied about six years ago. It was entitled *Small Things with Great Love* by Margot Starbuck. We did a series of sermons, and had adult studies based on this book. Some of you may remember when we did that.

I bring it up because of a little story Margot Starbuck tells in the introduction of her book. She talks about Hugh, who works with people who are homeless and struggling in the inner city of Raleigh, NC. It seems that Hugh was at a church talking about what he does and challenging the folks to get involved. One guy named Chuck really liked what Hugh had to say, however he felt frustrated about what Hugh was suggesting. Chuck had a very busy life, working long hours at his job. When he was not working he wanted to spend quality time with his family. He did not have the time to go down into the city and work with people who are homeless. Well, Hugh didn't get upset at Chuck or tell him he was terrible for saying something like that. Instead he asked, "Is there someone who cleans your office where you work?"

"Yes, there is a woman who cleans my office three times a week," Chuck replied. "What is her name?" Hugh asked. "I don't know her name," Chuck had to admit. "How long has she been working there?" Hugh asked. Well, by now Chuck was beginning to get the point. "Seven or eight years," he replied. "Seven or eight years, and you don't know her name." And that was all Hugh had to say.

A few weeks later, Hugh got a call from Chuck. "Her name is Regina," he said, and went on to tell Hugh how she was working two jobs to take care of her children. Chuck knew about her struggles, her hopes, her dreams. "You know this has messed me up?" he asked Hugh. Smiling Hugh said, "I know."

Margot went on to say, "You want to know just how messed up Chuck's life got to be? Chuck's family and Regina's family spent Christmas together last year. It was a holy mess."

(Incidentally, the man who cleans our church each week is named Robert. He is a single dad with a sweet little girl named Breanna, who is excited about the snow melting so she can get outside and ride her bike. Robert is a wonderful loving father and does a great job around here. And if you are here on some weekday morning and happen to meet up with him, I hope you tell him just how much you appreciate the job he does for us.)

But getting back to our story, all too often we are like Chuck. We become caught up in our own little world and are oblivious to those around us. We encounter people but we think of them only in terms of what they do, not in terms of who they are. That is the guy who cleans the church, not Robert. That is the girl who takes my order at McDonalds, not Ashley. He is the parking lot attendant, not Carlos. She is the woman who shows up every week at the Food Pantry, not Eloise. He is the homeless guy who is always on the same corner, not Larry.'

Now as I was working on this sermon the reports came about the horrifying attacks on those worshipers in the mosque in New Zealand. It is heart breaking and terrifying. An attack on people praying in a house of worship, whether it is a mosque in Christchurch or a synagogue in Pittsburgh, is an attack on all people at worship. As disciples of Jesus Christ we must always stand against such white supremacy and nationalistic hatred that inspired such vicious attacks. It is overwhelming and incomprehensible that there is such evil in this world, and it leaves us baffled as to what we should do, where we should even begin.

But then I think of what Mother Theresa once said; a line that Margot Starbuck used for the title of her book. Mother Theresa said, "God does not call us to do great things, only small things with great love." She is absolutely right. Patrick and Paul did indeed do great things. They crossed political, ethnic and religious borders. They went to places where others would never go. They defied racism and hatred. But it all began by doing small things with great love. It began with Patrick caring about the lowest of the low, even the slaves doing menial work. It began with Paul getting to know the name of a businesswoman who was open to what God had to say.

Lent is a season when we often give up something. I would urge you to take on something. Take on the challenge to be a blessing, to do something small with great love. Pay attention. Learn someone's name. Listen to their story. Cross some border if you can. Get to know someone from another religion or ethnic group or political party. Then show them some kindness for the love of Jesus. Do all that you can to be a blessing. So take with you this one last ancient Irish blessing that I just made up: May the warmth and light of God's love fill your heart with joy. May your fears and doubts melt away like the snow in springtime. And may the small things you do with great love blossom into beautiful flowers of mercy and grace. Thanks be to God for all his blessings. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen