

Colonies of Heaven

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 14, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:37-47, NRSV)

It seems hard to fathom sometimes, but it's been a year since our world changed and we worshiped together in person here in this Sanctuary. From where we stand today, we may feel a simultaneous tug to look *back* and to look *forward* ... To look back and assess the path we've trod and the lessons we've learned ... To look forward, to see the light ahead at the end of the tunnel, and take joy in the thought of hugging one another again.

But today, I don't want to talk about COVID, at least not in this sermon, though I *do* want to do a little looking back, in order that we can look forward with greater clarity and vision. This looking back is about re-visiting the legacy of a great saint of the Church who lived over 1500 years ago, but whose vision I believe is essential as we seek to be faithful moving forward.

He's on my mind because he has a holiday named for him, and it's coming up soon. It comes every year on March 17th, usually right in the middle of Lent, and honestly, it seems a good excuse to take our minds off all the self-examination and self-denial for a while. It's certainly one that I've always enjoyed observing in some fashion, even if stuck at home, and that's St Patrick's Day!

I know that may seem an odd thing to bring up right now, with our Lenten emphasis and all, but I saw something recently that reminded me why I resonate with it so much: *Everyone* is Irish on St Patrick's Day, and everyone is *welcome* to be Irish on St Patrick's Day! It doesn't *matter* if you're *really* Irish or not. The great parades of Boston, New York, and Savannah this year may still not be what they've been in the past, but they've never been Irish-only. People of *all* backgrounds and cultures are wearing those funny green hats. If only for one day, *everyone* is welcome, *everyone* is included, *everyone* is invited ... everyone and anyone can *belong*.

In this respect, the celebration of St Patrick's Day truly expresses something of the open, generous spirit of its legendary namesake. I use the word "legendary" intentionally, as we have to admit from the start that we don't really know that much about St Patrick's life. As beloved and revered as he was, the earliest secondary sources we have are full of wonderful stories, and some of them – *many* of them – probably didn't really happen. A certain Irish reputation for ... *blarney*, is well-deserved, at least when it comes to the accounts of their patron saint. No, Patrick did *not* chase all the snakes out of Ireland, and no, I feel safe in saying that he couldn't polymorph into a deer either!

But what we *can* know is good enough, without well-intentioned embellishment. What we *can* be confident about firmly establishes Patrick as one of history's most remarkable leaders, communicators, and organizers. And one not only with a lasting legacy to this day, but one whose vision remains profoundly relevant for us, as those who work for an inclusive and open Church.

Patrick was born in about the year 400 in what is today northeastern England to wealthy Roman-Celtic parents. Although his father was a Christian deacon, it is believed by many scholars that the father took on the role for its tax advantages (yes, even then!), and hence, there is no real evidence that Patrick came from a particularly religious family. By his own account, written later in life, he grew up as quite the young heathen!

However, his life would take a dramatic turn at the age of 16. He was taken prisoner by a group of Irish raiders, pirates, who were attacking his family's estate. They transported him to Ireland where he spent six years in captivity as a slave. During this time, he worked as a shepherd, outdoors and away from people. Lonely and afraid, he turned to the religion of his lost home for solace, and with much time for reflection, became a devoutly believing Christian.

Eventually, his prayers for freedom were answered. After more than six years as a prisoner and slave, Patrick escaped. According to his *Confessions*, he heard a voice—a voice which he believed to be God's—which spoke to him in a dream, telling him that he would soon go home, and that his ship was ready.

Fleeing his master, Patrick trustingly walked nearly 200 miles from County Mayo, where it is believed he was held, to the Irish coast. He travelled to a port, where he found a ship and with difficulty persuaded the captain to take him. After three days sailing, they landed, presumably in Britain, and apparently all left the ship, walking for 28 days in what he described as a "wilderness", becoming faint from hunger before finally encountering a herd of wild boar. Just before this, Patrick had urged the group to put their faith in God, and so on finding the herd, his credibility went through the roof. Soon after that, he found his way back home to his family.

Making it back, Patrick was received by his family and friends with surprise and joy. But the celebration was not to last long. A few years after his return, he told his love ones that he

intended to *return* to Ireland, this time as a *missionary*. They were crushed and incredulous as he told a story of a second dream. In his own words:

I saw a man coming, as it were from Ireland. He carried many letters, and he gave me one of them. I read the heading: "The Voice of the Irish". As I began the letter, I imagined in that moment that I heard the voice of those very people who were near the wood of Foclut, which is beside the western sea—and they cried out, as with one voice: "We appeal to you, holy servant boy: come and walk among us."

Soon after, Patrick began religious training, a course of study that lasted more than 15 years. After his ordination as a priest, he was finally sent on to Ireland with a dual mission: to minister to Christians *already* living in Ireland (there were some, though not many) and, more ambitiously, to work for the mass conversion of the Irish people.

Most of the Irish practiced a nature-based religion led by a class of priests you know as the Druids. But Patrick had an advantage that no other missionary to the Emerald Isle had ever had before him – a deep, intimate, inside knowledge of the people and their ways. Familiar with their language and customs from six years of living among them, he *understood* them – he had even found that he *loved* them.

And so instead of attempting to eradicate native Irish beliefs, Patrick chose to incorporate their traditions into his teaching. For instance, he used bonfires to celebrate Easter since the Irish were used to honoring their gods with fire. He also superimposed a sun, a powerful Irish symbol, onto the Christian cross to create what is now called the Celtic cross, so that veneration of the symbol would seem more natural to them. And his using the very Irish shamrock to teach the difficult notion of the Trinity is the stuff of legend – made all the better because *that* legend really happened!

It was this – his willingness to *identify* with a people that had once held him as a slave – that was the key to his greatness. He *respected* them. He came bearing what he deeply believed to be an essential and necessary gift for them, but without trying to change who they essentially were. And he came to identify them as his own people, to whom he had bound himself in love. His use of a simple two-word phrase in his *Confessions* – “We Irish” – says everything.

And his approach and his methods were astonishingly effective. By the time he died, in about 460, it is believed that he had baptized over 100,000 people and had founded over 300 Christian communities all over Ireland! It is this second fact that may be Patrick’s greatest legacy, for he established a blueprint, a strategy, for communities that worked, stood the test of time, and which proved to be the essential element in the evangelization of the Irish nation.

For you see, these communities were more than just quiet country churches, each with a small flock dedicated to coming to worship on Sunday and eating corned beef and cabbage afterward. They were intentionally-founded Christian *villages* – with a monastic core – meaning that while they included monks or nuns who lived under a monastic rule, such were not the

only people who made their homes there. The villages included teachers, scholars, priests, craftsmen, artists, cooks, farmers, families, and children, as well as monastics—all under the leadership of a lay abbot or abbess. They had little use for more than a handful of ordained priests, or for people seeking ordination; they were essentially lay movements. More than a thousand people lived in some of these communities.

They were established to be intentional communities of prayer, artistic and creative activity, hospitality, and team ministry ... communities which were meant to model for all to see a cooperative and peaceful way of life, a demonstration of what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. Some even called them “Colonies of Heaven.”

They represented an almost completely different vision for the purpose of intentional Christian community than had been practiced before. And what had been practiced before is the same as what has been most practiced since – the founding of traditional monasteries as we ordinarily understand them. They were organized to protest, and escape from, the materialism of the world and the corruption of the institutional Church; the point was usually to withdraw from the world in order to save and cultivate their own souls. Accordingly, the leaders of traditional monasteries located them in isolated places, off the beaten track, often as far from civilization as was practical. Most of these monks and nuns were men and women of deep and sincere faith, and they are worthy of our respect.

But if the purpose of traditional monasteries was to escape the world, the communities founded by Patrick were organized to *penetrate* the world and to spread the good news. If the purpose of traditional monasteries was for the spiritually dedicated to save their *own* souls, the Irish communities were founded to save others’. If the purpose of traditional monasteries was to hide away, Patrick and the Irish Christians founded their communities in places accessible to the traffic of the time, such as nearness to established settlements, on highly visible hilltops, or on islands along well-traveled sea-lanes ... Places in which they would be *visible* ... *Bases* from which they could reach out in ministry.

And this ministry wasn’t just about the “spiritual” needs of people, either. As University of St Andrews professor Ian Bradley has written, “In scattered rural communities with virtually no other institutions or centres, [these Irish/Celtic Christian villages] fulfilled the roles of hospital, hotel, school, university, arts workshop, open prison and reformatory, night shelter and drop-in day centre, as well as church, retreat house, mission station and place of prayer and spiritual healing.” (*Colonies of Heaven*, p. 11)

They proved to be just the thing to reach the people with the gospel. Not only did they seek to minister to the whole person, but they pioneered an approach to reaching people that even today still stands as a powerful challenge for the contemporary Church – the priority of *belonging over believing*.

The traditional way that the Church has attempted to reach people has been to (1) present the Christian message; (2) invite them to decide to believe in Christ and become Christians; and (3)

if they decide affirmatively, welcome them into the church and its fellowship. It all seems very logical to us because that's the way evangelism goes, right? We explain the gospel, they hopefully accept Christ, and we then welcome them into the church. What could make more sense than that?

But Patrick did it differently. His idea was that *belonging* should come *first*. We human beings are social animals, and one of our most basic needs is to feel part of a community of others who love us and whom we love. And just as Jesus did not give an orthodoxy test to those whom he called, Patrick felt it far more important to invite people into friendship and fellowship unburdened by requirements or expectations. Folks could participate in the life of the community, and within its fellowship, engage in conversation, ministry, prayer, and worship. They could belong and be embraced, along with all their questions and doubts. No timetable, no deadlines, no coercion. It should hardly be surprising that so many, with gladness, would go on to make a commitment.

This legacy is a powerful one and calls to us even today. It is a call to build communities of prayer, artistic and creative activity, hospitality, and team ministry that can reach our neighbors as the early Irish Christians did theirs.

It is a vision of a gospel which is not partial but embraces the *whole* of life. It is a vision of life lived not as an escape from reality, but for the deepest engagement with it. It is a vision of a church which doesn't exist for itself, but for the healing of others and of the world. It is a vision of community marked far less by rules and requirements, and far, far more by radical welcome and generosity ... by questions and doubts honestly embraced ... by hopes and fears and longings shared ... by work, hard work, joyfully taken up ... by love gratefully given and received.

It is this vision which underlies affirmation of faith which we will make with one another today – that grounded in the creative, reconciling, and empowering work of God, we will pledge anew

to inspire each other to prayer, study, and stewardship,
to cultivate an open, caring church
where diverse gifts are discovered, respected, and employed;
to minister faithfully to the poor, lonely, sick, and those in need;
to reach out, sharing our faith,
inviting and welcoming others into our fellowship;
and to seek justice and healing
in the church, community and world.

There is nothing about this which comes easy. It comes as all things do when human beings are involved. But in the midst of all our striving to get it right and our acknowledgement of our failures, may we be emboldened by the mysterious presence of a Grace which will not let us go.

May we both rest in this Presence and strive mightily in its power, as we – with unflagging hope and risk-taking courage – seek to be such a community in our own time and place, for the healing of the world. May we, too, build a Colony of Heaven.

To the Glory of God! Amen.