

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY, JUNE 7, 2020

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"A Gathering of Friends"

Based on Hebrews:12:28-13:8

Patrick stepped up to the grand fire that burned high and bright in the center of the village. He could feel its warmth on his back as he turned and scanned the sea of faces flickering in the firelight. He was reminded of words from Hebrews, of a God who was

*"A consuming fire."
(v12:28)*

But this was not a fire that destroyed.

- This was a fire that brought life and laughter.
- This was a fire that brought steaming stew from the pot and the sharing of a grog of ale or mead.
- This was a fire that brought music and dancing around it.
- This was a fire that brought young lovers together and warm memories to grieving widows.

Something deep and emotional swelled within him, and at that moment, Patrick knew why God had called him back to these strange Celtic

people to preach. Their rituals were pagan, yes. But their Spirits were full and brimming, in a way that whispered of the Spirit of Christ.

- In time, he would teach them the Holy Stories.
- In time, he would be taught by them, the true depth of the trinity: of all that is One, and the One who is all.

Patrick was no stranger to the Celtic world. Captured from England as a child, he spent his formative years as a slave in the wilds of Ireland, serving a strange people with stranger customs. Yet, Patrick could see that there was a deep respect for community, hospitality, and care for each other, which he would later come to recognize as oddly familiar to the apostle's teachings:

*Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.
(13:1-2)*

There was balance and harmony in family life, rules in society that were adhered to, and a fathomless

understanding of the intimate connection between the land and the people, and the Spirit: earth, fire, wind, rain.

Patrick eventually escaped his shackles as a teen, and made his way home to his family. In time, he became a priest, but felt himself drawn back to the feared and misunderstood Celtic people. Their approach to life and their understanding of the Spirit of life was so much more organic, and authentic, and amazingly simple, when compared to the Benedictine Order of rules and chants and formulaic prayers and creeds. How could all, that he had witnessed and lived in the Celtic villages, be bad?

So, Patrick returned to Ireland.

He returned to familiar faces and established trust in the villages.

He told them stories at festival times, around the food and ale.

He picked grain in the fields with them, and shared the parables.

He built barns with them and told them of Bethlehem.

He sat with their sick and quietly spoke of Christ on the cross who promised:

*"Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you."
(13:5)*

And as the Celts spoke of seasons and the rhythm of life, Patrick shared of a Saviour:

"The same yesterday and today and forever." (13:8)

Patrick's approach was unorthodox. He was scolded and scorned by the established Church in continental Europe for not adhering to the rules. And while great learned priests and scholars gathered in conclaves and symposiums to debate the intellectual understanding of God as Father, Son and Spirit, which sounds for many of us today, a rather dull, religious version of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First"; Patrick quietly continued to preach to the Celtic people, who had found a way to seamlessly understand the breath of the Spirit in all things, and within their very self: all in One, and One in all.

The Christian Church has known for at least two generations now, that it was going to need to start being unorthodox if it was going to continue to thrive; that the glory days of putting a steeple on a building and expecting automatic success, were gone. We have been a reluctant people to change, though. Being unorthodox, is not

generally part of a Presbyterian's vocabulary.

Technology has dramatically changed how the world works in the last ten years. The world has opened up, and perhaps, now, we have too much information. Would Calvin have approved of Livestreaming worship? Would Zwingli have consented to singing hymns with music videos?

Not only have we had to make room for different faith traditions, no faith tradition, or various self-declared traditions, but now it's also websites, twitter, and blogs. Sometimes we can hear common whispers, and other times, radical speeches that are frightening.

A virus has turned our world upside down over the last few months, and is likely to shape how we do things for the next while. And as if we didn't anything else to concern us, we hear of riots and protests and great confusion spreading around the world.

What next?

We've had enough Lord.

"Stop the train, I want to get off."

Will things ever get back to normal?

"I just want to go back to Church!"

Sound familiar?

But wait. We're forgetting something, you and I.

We have *"A kingdom that cannot be shaken" (12:28)*

We have a Saviour that *"Is the same yesterday and today and forever." (13:8)*

So, let's just be what we know to be: a gathering of friends.

Let's be unorthodox, and unapologetic about it.

Let's use the technology that we have before us to make church work for us.

Let's focus on the One who is all, and let Him surprise us with His Spirit as it moves through us and our day.

Let us continue to be what we know we are to be: a gathering of friends.

- Be welcoming.
- Be cheerful.
- Be kind.
- Be respectful
- Share.
- Take care of each other.

We have a God who is unfailing. We have a Saviour whose stories we can tell. We have the Spirit shaping our days.

And we have a promise:

Yesterday. Today. Forever.

Do we really need anything more?

I open my heart to be the hospitality of Christ, to all those who come to my door.

I open my heart to embrace the stranger, the friend, the rich, the poor

I open my life to offer a generous heart towards all.