

St. Patrick for Mennonites

Luke 13:31-35 by Patty Friesen (March 17/19)

One morning in 400 A.D., a young man named Patricius was walking along a beach in western Britain when a fleet of Irish longboats raided the shore and took Patricius as slave to Ireland. Patricius lived like a shepherd slave, terrorized by his master. In his desperation Patricius found his nominal Christianity slowly taking on a more substantial form. He began to pray many times a day, and he discovered a rising love and faith in God within his heart. He should stay out in the forests and awaken before daylight to pray in the snow and rain, warmed only by the Spirit of God burning in his heart.

After six years of servitude, Patricius heard a mysterious voice assuring him he would return to Britain. He ran away 200 miles to southern Ireland where he boarded a ship to France. Upon arrival, he found his way to a monastery where he studied to become a priest and ultimately returned home to Britain. But after many years of faithful service, he heard another Irish voice calling, "We beg you, come and walk among us again."

So Patrick returned to Ireland at age 48 with 12 companions and a simple plan. He would approach a tribal chieftain to seek his permission to form a community of faith adjacent to the tribal settlement. The team would then become involved in the life of the community, engaging them in acts of service such as mediating disputes and tending the sick. Those who were responsive would join the apostolic band and worship with them. If God blessed the efforts, they would build a church. When the group moved on, Patrick would leave a protege behind to serve the fledgling church while taking one

more two more young people to join in planting another faith community near another tribal settlement. This simple plan was repeated again and again until an Irish civilization arise, like a phoenix, from the ashes of war, slavery and human sacrifice.

It is hard to imagine a time or place that was more opposed to Christianity than fifth-century Ireland. Its economy was built almost entirely on raiding, slavery and warfare. For several centuries before and after the birth of Christ, the Irish marauded British coasts with zeal, taking slaves, cutting off heads and putting them on stakes. The religious life of Ireland offered no respite from blood shed. Irish druid paganism was as terrifying as the Irish pirates themselves. Theirs was a religious human sacrifice to please the druid gods.

Despite this opposition, Patrick's efforts were overwhelmingly successful. Within 30 years, his small band of priests had converted between 30 and 40 percent of Ireland to Christ. Human sacrifice was eliminated and slavery was almost entirely abolished. How did Patrick accomplish such a remarkable transformation in such a short time?

Patrick sought to fulfill his calling to Ireland by building monastic communities. Ian Bradley, a scholar of Celtic Christianity at St. Andrews University, contrasts Celtic monastic life with Egyptian monasticism of the fourth and fifth centuries. Though there are many similarities, a striking difference is that the Egyptian monks generally practiced radical separation from the world, whereas the Celtic monasteries provided places of sanctuary but were also intensely involved in the affairs of the world and the lives of the people they served. Egyptian monasteries were organized to protest and escape the materialism of Rome and the corruption of the church. The monks built them to cultivate and save their own souls. The Celtic monasteries, in contrast, were organized

to save other people's souls. So Patrick's monasteries shared with all monasteries the function of being a place of withdrawal, but they were unique in their simultaneous commitment to community engagement.

Celtic monasteries were the kingdom of God on earth. They were populated with craftspeople, artists, farmers, families and children. Cows were herded, sheep were sheared, cloth was made and crops were cultivated. Everyone had enough to eat and the forces of division, violence and evil were banished. Patrick integrated both the sacred and secular with prayers for daily tasks of living. There were prayers for planting, meals, journeys and welcoming guests. Like this prayer: "I will kindle my fire this morning, in presence of the holy angels of heaven. God, kind Thou in my heart within, a flame of love to my neighbour, to my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all, to the brave, to the knave, to the thrall." St. Patrick's prayers were all inclusive of everyone and everything - kind of like the Good Night Moon of praying.

The beauty of this prayer comes in no small part from the intimate proximity of daily tasks of ordinary human life and the spiritual mission to love both God and neighbour. Patrick also believed that humans were born to contemplate and so created prayer rooms or enclosures for solitude and contemplation like our own new OMC prayer room in the Sunday School hall. Patrick also integrated Christianity with the natural Irish affection for nature and whose druid roots lended themselves to a posture of finding the Christian Creator God within the beauty of creation.

Finally, Patrick loved the loyal, courageous and generous Irish despite their history of violence. It is believed Patrick rid Ireland of snakes, a symbol of the devil but in a land that continues to be rent asunder by the memory of ancient crimes and

injustices, it should be remembered that St. Patrick was himself the victim of Irish injustice before he ever became the symbol of Irish pride. His extraordinary return to the site of his oppression - not to wreak his vengeance, but to implant the reconciling seeds of his own hard-won faith - created the spiritual conquest of Ireland. But it followed the prior victory of love over the anger and bitterness in his own heart. If the memory of this dimension of Patrick's life had long ago become the main feature of his feast day celebration, it might be truly said that there are no serpents left in Ireland.

At first glance, it doesn't look like the Irish and Mennonites have anything in common. The Irish write long love ballads and drink and dance. Mennonites write hymns and serve and cook. But I believe St. Patrick could have been Mennonite! Anabaptists in the 16th century also believed in creating heaven on earth through equality and non-violence in communities formed to follow Christ. While the Hutterite branch of Anabaptism took community living seriously, Mennonites believed alternative community living could be achieved through the church. Swiss and Dutch Anabaptists were originally priests and nuns who knew a life of simplicity and poverty and those became original Anabaptist values as well as community engagement. Persecution and martyrdom drove Mennonites into hiding in caves and into an underground movement rather than a movement of community engagement. Persecution shaped theology and isolationist and separatist behaviour rather than community engagement.

Mennonites emigrating to North America continued in their isolationist rural community living. I think changed with urbanization which forced Mennonites out of their enclaves and into urban neighbourhoods that needed their engagement. In the

70's we have the rise of Mennonite Voluntary Service in response to the Vietnam Draft and brings Mennonites to serve in urban centers. Urban Mennonite churches become more diverse with Hispanics and African Americans and First Nations and hallelujah, Mennonites start intermarrying! Community engagement returns to Anabaptism and the message of simplicity and the More with Less Cookbook is attractive to hippie Mennonite converts:).

Which bring us to our present time and the gifts and challenges of community engagement in our time. First of all whose community? We meet in Osler- the Perfect Urban Rural Blend but some of our homes are in Hague, Martensville, Warman, and Saskatoon. As much as I love Osler and work on the community garden here, my own Buena Vista neighbourhood in the city could use a community garden and some youth activities. We do what we can where we are at and our church reviews challenge us to keep community engagement before us - so much so that our Mission and Service Committee is contemplating a name change to Community Engagement Committee to more accurately reflect our purpose of education and conversations with local people. Vine and Table Intentional Community on Avenue E is another crop of young committed Anabaptists interested in community engagement and we support their efforts.

Like St. Patrick, may our love of our neighbours and love of creation and local involvement shape our purpose and work. Let's pray...

Robert Ellsberg, All Saints, p. 121

The Gospel in a Violent Culture, Christian Century, June 7, 2017, p. 30-32