



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
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IRISH SENSIBILITIES: CELTIC SPIRITUALITY

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PSALM 104

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, for you, my God, are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent. You ride on the wings of the wind. You set the earth on its foundation; you make springs gush forth in the valleys giving drink to every wild animal. By the streams of water the birds of the air have their habitation and sing among the branches of the trees. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the human heart. O God, how evident are your words! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. May the glory of the Lord endure forever. Bless the Lord, O my soul.*

There is an area in the west of Ireland that particularly comes to mind when I read this passage of scripture, not because of its lushness but because of its emptiness. Here is a landscape in the land of St. Patrick, whose birthday we celebrate today, that epitomizes what it means to be wrapped in light under the tent of the heavens, where one sees the springs of water trickling if not gushing and feels as though one could ride the wings of the wind. It is a place called The Burren, a strangely barren and desolate expanse of limestone rocks that remind one of the visions of a moonscape, seemingly void of any form of life. But beneath the fissures of these large, flat rocks life in smaller forms is teeming with delicate and colorful wild flowers, insects making their way through the labyrinth and puddles of water scattered here and there which reflect the sky. When one British Parliamentarian visited this place in the bloody takeover in claiming Ireland for the British crown said disparagingly of the Burren: “there is not enough water to drown a man, not enough wood to hang him and not enough earth to bury him.”

Yet in the Burren, life is framed by the horizon. The horizon shelters life yet constantly calls the eye to new frontiers and possibilities. The mystery of this landscape is endemic to its existence. Here it feels as if a wild, surrealistic God laid down the whole landscape. These stones, ever patient, ever still, continue to praise the silence of time. The Irish landscape is full of memory; it holds the ruins and traces of an ancient civilization. The landscape continues to change as one travels, bringing surprises, offering ever new vistas that surprise the eye and call the imagination. This landscape has a wild yet serene complexity. In a sense, it reflects the Psalmists vision of the glory of God even as it reflects the nature of Celtic consciousness.

The Celts were a group of people who came from the mainland of Europe into Ireland hundreds of years ago bringing with them an appreciation of the mystery of life as it was mirrored in the world of nature. The Celtic mind was neither discursive nor systematic; it did not approach life through logic or systems. Intuition and a keen sense of the natural world were paramount and in this speculation the Celts brought the sublime unity of life and experience to expression. The Celtic mind is not burdened with dualism. It does not separate matter and spirit; the imagination articulates the inner friendship that embraces nature, divinity, the underworld, and human world as one. The dualism that separates the visible from the invisible, time from eternity, the human from the divine is totally alien to the Celtic sensibility. And while that Celtic mindset is encapsulated in an era long past, its philosophy continues to inspire not only present-day Ireland but those who immerse themselves in it when visiting St. Patrick's island. If you're interested in such a sojourn, there are a group of us going to do just that in September; you're welcome to join us.

The Celtic mind was never drawn to the single line; it avoided ways of seeing and being that seeks satisfaction in certainty. They lived creatively in the tension of extremes, of the contradictions of life, holding in balance the complete otherness of God with the presence of God in the world of nature and deep within the human spirit. They celebrated the cycles of life, having a wonderful respect for the mystery of the circle and the spiral. The circle of life, the unending cycle of nature, the day, the year, without beginning, without end speaks to the ongoing connection to life, to love, to God, to friendships. Modern-day Post-Enlightenment western logical thinking could take some cues for living abundantly, as Jesus said, from the Irish Celts whose respect for the unity of life served them well in their pursuit of happiness and well-being.

Within the Celtic sensibility is the understanding of friendship among people that finds its inspiration and culmination in the sublime notion of the *anam cara*. *Anam* is the Gaelic word for soul; *cara* is the word for friend. The soul friend. The soul mate. The *anam cara* is the person to whom you could reveal the hidden intimacies of your life without judgment, reproach or analysis. The Celtic world is one of belonging, not only to one another in trusted friendships but to the world. The *anam cara* is the broad, intimate connection with the human friend but also with the soul of the earth and all creation. In the *anam cara* light is adored. It is the light that engulfs like the garment of which the Psalmist speaks as well as the light of insight, of relationship, or of enlightenment. The soul awakens to the power of mystery as it moves from darkness to light. Here all of nature is revered as a soul mate as it is expressed in the Celtic prayer entitled "*The Deer's Cry*" which we read in part as our Invitation to Gather.

This sacred notion of friendship is paramount in the Celtic mind, continuing today in the Irish culture in which the ancient Celtic notion of *anam cara* melds with the Christian sensibility of connecting with one another and with nature through God's love as it is seen through the Jesus St. Patrick came to Ireland to tell of.

Ireland is unique in religious history for being the only land into which Christianity was introduced without bloodshed. There are no Irish martyrs. The reason for this is the willingness and interest in early Christians to integrate their faith with the ancient practices of the Druids and pagans of Ireland. Many of the old rituals, the rites and the seasonal holidays were adopted within the Christian faith, creating a unique kind of faith that exists in part to this day in Ireland.

As the Christianized warrior children of St. Patrick's flock lay down the swords of battle, they very much remained Irish. Unlike the continental church fathers, the Irish never troubled themselves overmuch about eradicating pagan influences, which they tended to wink at and enjoy. The pagan festivals continued to be celebrated. And even today there is a town in Kerry that holds a fertility festival each August, where a magnificent he-goat presides for three days and nights, with lots of drinking and wild dancing. It is this characteristically Irish *mélange* of pagan and Christian that forms the theme of Ireland's customs and rituals today, from fairies and leprechauns to giants and tall tales told in the great Irish tradition. As John O'Donohue suggests, Celtic fairy stories suggest a region of the soul that inhabits the eternal where we are not vulnerable to ravages of normal time.

Interestingly, the lack of martyrdom created a dilemma for the Irish, to whom a glorious death by violence presents such an exciting finale. If all Ireland had received Christianity without a fight, the Irish would just have to think up some new form of martyrdom. The Irish of the late fifth and early sixth centuries soon found a solution, which they called the Green Martyrdom. Green Martyrs were those who, leaving behind the comforts and pleasures of ordinary human society retreated to the woods, or to the mountain top, or to a lonely island to study the scriptures and commune with God.

Even today, the Irish are masters at holding in tension the world of the rational and quantitative with the world of the mysterious and the mythical. On one of our previous church trips there several years ago, our guide pointed out a freeway being built that had been halted in the middle of the field because a fairy bush was in its path. It seemed a simple solution to us: cut down the 5-foot bush and get on with the building of the road. But to cut down a fairy bush in Ireland, even today, is to take a great risk upsetting the little people who live beneath it in the earth who will bring a lifetime of disaster to the one who cuts it down. While the engineers, construction workers and overseers were all educated, rational people, she pointed out, no one was willing to cut down the fairy bush. So the road had been halted until a decision was made as to what to do. On our second trip to Ireland a few years later, sure enough, the fairy bush was still standing, and the freeway had been redesigned to go around the little shrub. There's something charming about a country that lives in the paradox of the values of modern progression yet also bows to past tradition even if none of it makes sense. The past, present and future are connected in a unique way that honors the beliefs that no one really takes seriously but which few are willing to dispel. To do so would be to destroy the Irish sensibility.

Ireland is a land of many ruins. Here ruins are preserved as sacred places, not leveled to make room for new and modern buildings. Ruins in Ireland are not empty; they are holy places full of the presence of God and of those who once inhabited them. Several years ago a priest in Connemara, in the unspoilt northwest of Ireland, was going to build a parking lot outside his church. There was a ruin nearby that had been vacated for fifty or sixty years. He went to the man whose family had lived there long ago and asked the man to give him the stones for the foundation. The man refused. The priest asked why. The man replied: what would the souls of my ancestors do then? Though the ruins had been empty for years there was still a particular affinity and attachment to this place that underscores the Irish sensibility that the life of a person leaves an imprint on the land, on the mind and on the heart. Love does not remain within the heart but flows out to build secret tabernacles in a landscape as well. Even as God dwells in the heavens and on the earth, and all of nature reflects the glory and beauty of God, so also those created in God's image, those people from the beginning of time, reflect the beauty of a place and are not to be forgotten though they be gone in body.

Besides the great outdoors, there are two ways the Irish people keep in touch with God and one another: the cathedral and the pub. The cathedral you understand. And if you've been in Ireland, you understand the vital role the pub plays in public life. The public house, or pub, is one of Ireland's most beloved institutions. There are nearly 18,000 pubs in Ireland, 1000 of those in Dublin alone. They are part clubhouse, part town hall, part church, serving as venues for social events, sporting news, local gossip, music sessions, literary soirées, real estate deals, political debates, revolutionary plots and of course for throwing back a pint of Guinness or a "ball of malt", also known as a glass of whiskey. The protagonist Leopold Bloom, in James Joyce's monumental masterpiece Ulysses, says "A good puzzle would be to cross Dublin without passing a pub."

A sense of wholeness permeates the Irish sensibility. One encounters the holy in the Burren as in the scriptures; one communes with God in the pub as well as in the cathedral; a pint of Guinness and soda bread or a chalice of wine and a wafer serve the body, soul and mind equally. God is known in the silent, quiet whisper of the wind on the mountain as well as the good "craic" that is found at a party ("craic" being the Irish word for unbridled fun, a drug of sorts, but not the kind that word describes in our culture). God is found in what we might call the sacred and the secular, but that is a misleading division, for in the Irish sensibility there is no dualism. It is simply life and God is in it all.

Today on this St. Patrick's Day, surrounded by the world God has given us in sun, moon, stars, as well as the people around us, we would do well to take into our own sensibility what we observe in the Celtic Irish spirituality. This Celtic spirit is expressed quite succinctly in the words of Robert Fulghum when he writes:

*I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge; that myth is more potent than history; that dreams are more powerful than facts; that hope always triumphs over experience; that laughter is the cure for grief and love is stronger than death.*

Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

## PASTORAL PRAYER

On this day of the celebration of St. Patrick, we are reminded that the Celtic spirit has a great sense of the significance of each day. Each new day is sacred. The Celts never entered the day with a repetitious deadening perspective; they took each day as a new beginning, a new creation, a new genesis.

Today we offer this ancient prayer that is an invocation to God, that the holy vision may guard and guide the day; that the human eye may see with the divine eye and bless all it sees. Each new day is a time of reflexive blessing that embraces God, self, others and the world of nature around us.

We pray this prayer that has been offered for hundreds of years:

God bless to me the new day;  
never given to me before, it is to bless God's presence.  
Bless to me my eye that my eye may bless all it sees.  
I will bless my neighbor; may my neighbor bless me.  
Give me a clean heart and let me not wander from your sight.

This day is sacred and given to us as a gift from God. Bless it to us and give us strength to use it for the good of all people around us throughout this day.

We pray in the name of the God of each new day, amen.