

SERMON

SECOND  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

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460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

"Welcome One Another"

O.T. Genesis 12.1-3

N.T. Romans 15.7-13

Rev. David Holden

October 21, 2018

Do you remember that kids' game from the 1980's "Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?" You would be excused for feeling like you've been playing the home church version lately. After my having spent a few weeks away, some of you might be might be excused for asking "Where in the world is Pastor David Holden?!" Well, ironically, I have been *all over* the world-- or at least all over what feels like a pretty big part of it!

In the past three weeks, Bennie and I traveled from Glasgow, to Edinburgh, to Paris, to Clermont-Ferrand in the center of France, to Florence, to Italy. We were going to try to squeeze in Beijing, but it would have involved adding another couple of days to our trip and I knew that I needed to get back in time for Trunk or Treat. That bouncy slide isn't going to watch itself, after all.

All of this travel in the service of? Bennie has received a Lilly Foundation Clergy sabbatical grant. In order to do so, she has had to put together not only a roadmap of our expeditions, but also of her studies. The portions in Italy and France were to visit some of the great cathedrals and sites for religious art in Europe. We also retraced the steps of one of the forbears of modern Creation Theology the scientist and Catholic priest Teilhard de Chardin. We will share both pictures and insights about these in a Second Experience program early in 2019.

Today, though, I'd like to talk about the first part of the trip. Our travels in Scotland and Ireland offered opportunity for Bennie and I to explore a major component of her sabbatical proposal—a study of the history and lasting impact of Celtic Spirituality.

For a week before I joined Bennie in Glasgow, she traveled to the island of Iona off the coast of Scotland to join with others on a pilgrimage led by John Phillip Newell. For those of you who may not know about "JP" as Bennie refers to him these days, he is perhaps the preeminent interpreter of the Celtic Christian tradition in our time. Going on pilgrimage with him would be sort of like working on your jump shot with Coach Cal.

In her reading and learning with Newell, a principle figure emerged—St. Brigid—the female patron saint of Ireland reputed to have lived and served there in the fifth and sixth centuries. As is the case with many a saint, her biography is full of wonders and miracles.

For instance, as an expert dairywoman and brewer, she was reputed to turned water into beer. Her prayers were said to still the wind and the rain. On an occasion when Brigid was travelling to see a doctor for a headache, she stayed at the house of a Leinster couple who had two mute daughters. The daughters were travelling with Brigid when her horse startled, causing her to fall and graze her head on a stone. A touch of Brigid's blood healed the girls of their muteness.

You begin to catch my drift? Brigid was and is a force to be reckoned with—which is why three Sundays ago we made our way to Saint Brigid's Parish church in Kildare to see whether and how her presence inhabited *that* place. I experienced that it most assuredly did, but in a most unusual way.

As you might expect the sanctuary was filled with the iconography of the saint—most prominently the cross that signifies her legacy. Beyond that, though, something somewhat unexpected kicked in. I say “somewhat” for this reason: Among Brigid's many qualities, she is perhaps most well-known for hospitality. For instance, we attribute to her the Celtic Rune of Hospitality which reads:

*I saw a stranger today.  
I put food for him  
in the eating-place  
And drink  
in the drinking-place  
And music  
in the listening-place.*

*In the Holy name  
of the Trinity  
He blessed myself  
and my family.  
And the lark said in her warble  
Often, often, often  
Goes Christ  
in the stranger's guise.*

*O, oft and oft and oft,  
Goes Christ  
in the stranger's guise.*

Powerful stuff. And sure enough, the priest preached from a powerful scripture regarding hospitality-- Matthew 25.34-40.

‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Oh, my goodness, I thought, we've hit the theological jackpot! He had me right in the palm of his hand until he connected that passage with, I kid you not, sharing a cup of tea. Somehow, we went from hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and imprisoned to cucumber sandwiches with the crusts removed and a lump of sugar and pinkies extended. That seemed like pretty weak tea. How did *that* happen?!

Now, to be fair, he did come around to a salient point—one not lost on two strangers traveling in a strange land. While we are, of course, called to radical acts of justice, mercy and hospitality, we are also called to everyday acts of simple kindness. In a world choking on the poison of hostility, maybe a sip of civility has the power to save a life.

For some, in fact, it toast and tea might even stand in for the bread of life and the cup of salvation. I came to understand that Saint Brigid who put food in the eating place and drink in the drinking place was, indeed, alive and well in her parish. Even if it seemed in an idiosyncratically British way.

All of which brings me around to our text and topic this morning which, by now, you might have thought I might never get to or hoped you had escaped. In Paul's letter to the Romans and in the title of my message we receive what sounds like pretty simple advice: "Welcome One Another."

Let me unpack that a little. Unlike others of Paul's letters that focus on particular problems among particular people, Romans articulates a broad theology. In his 2012 work *Evolution of the Word*, Marcus Borg suggests that a fundamental purpose of the letter to the Romans is simply this: "[to] explicate (the) central theme of the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the context of God's covenant with Israel."

He builds his case by citing Romans 1.16 which states: "[the Gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Put another way, Paul might be saying "the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, first to the insiders, then to the outsiders."

Why would that need saying? Well, it seems that "in the year 49, the emperor Claudius ordered the expulsion of Jews from Rome. Christian Jews were, of course, a subset of those expelled... Thus, from roughly 49 or 50, the Christ-communities would have become primarily and perhaps completely Gentile." Then, we learn "in 54 Claudius's edict was rescinded."

Borg wonders out loud:

"Would the Christian Gentile communities have *welcomed* Christian Jews back? During the years that Christian Jews had been gone, positions of leadership (however informal) would have been filled by Christian Gentiles. Might these Gentiles even have seen returned Christian Jews as relative *outsiders*? And would Christian Jews have *felt* like outsiders?"

All of a sudden "welcome" rather than weak tea has become strong medicine. Facing the hostility of a massive and powerful empire while living in a house divided, "Welcome" may have been the only recipe for early Christianity's survival. To reiterate the idea above, it might very well have offered the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

Now, just one last thought. Drawing from Second's Mission statement we have dubbed this year's Stewardship campaign: "Caring for One Another." In the context of what feels like a manifestly uncaring world these days, "Caring for one another" seems like a worthy and not inconsequential goal.

When we support Second's ministries such as the Deacons, our Parish nurse Jackie Graves, pastoral care given by the ministerial staff, hospitality ranging from fellowship meals to community events like the upcoming Trunk or Treat, we, in ways we might not have

considered, be living out the Gospel. That's good news and good work that deserves our sacrifice and support.

But, there is more: Hear also the challenge of St. Brigid, her rune of hospitality, her parish priest, the gospel of Matthew and the letter to the Romans. Take seriously that salvation becomes most fully known when the "one another" to whom we extend Christian welcome encompasses not only the insider, but the outsider. Not only to the familiar, but also to the stranger.

God calls us to a greater communion and a profounder commitment than the congregation gathered within these four walls. In order to answer that call, we may need to dig deeper not only in our giving, but also in our living. Remember: The Gospel "is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Put another way, the gospel lives in us when we give life to another, and then another, and then another.

*O, oft and oft and oft,  
Goes Christ  
in the stranger's guise.*

Each of us carries a different image of the stranger— of the other. What that picture looks like to you is less of a question for me than this: When another comes to join us, are we ready to welcome him or her in?

Amen.