

Home Church Package, Sunday August 16, 2020

By Rev. Julie Lebrun - Inlet United Church, Port Moody BC

I hope this finds you well. This is prepared as an alternative to worship during this time of COVID-19 and not being able to meet in person. Please pass it on to anyone who you think might appreciate it. We also have an online service. Details are on our website at www.inletunited.ca.

This week I've been reading and thinking about Celtic spirituality and prayer.

Opening Prayer

In the morning light, O God,
may I glimpse your image deep within me
the threads of eternal glory
woven into the fabric of every man and woman.
Again may I catch sight of the mystery of the human soul
fashioned in your likeness
deeper than knowing
more enduring than time.
And in glimpsing these threads of light
amidst the weakness and distortions of my life
let me be recalled
to the strength and beauty deep in my soul.
Let me be recalled
to the strength and beauty of your image in every living soul.
(Prayer written by J. Philip Newell, Celtic Benediction and Celtic Treasurer)

When I joined the United Church around 1990 I was almost 30 years old. I didn't know much about theology, church or God. But I knew I needed something to help me in my life. My limited understanding of God was what I had absorbed through the media and culture; the idea of "original sin" saying that all people were somehow sinful and terrible creatures. Unless they admitted this and somehow accepted God or Jesus they would remain in the "original sin" state.

This did not and does not make sense to me. Fortunately I learned this is only one understanding of theology.

I also learned that there was another understanding, certainly one that made more sense to me and actually helped me in my life.

I learned that the light/love/life of God is actually deep inside each of us. We don't need to do anything, earn it, or make it happen. It just is. As the Genesis story tells us we are made in the image of God. This was such a revelation to me at a time in my life when I was not able to do very much. I learned my worth and acceptance was already there regardless of what I was able to do and achieve. Such a radical idea in our achievement driven world! Now when I went to do things in my life it came from a place of giving...rather than a place of achieving. It is a subtle but important difference.

This theology (understanding of God) has its roots in Celtic spirituality and also in the bible. A little bit of history helps us understand this. Around the year of 412 Common Era, Augustine and Pelagius argued about the nature of God and humanity.

Augustine spoke for this idea of "original sin." He described humanity as essentially sinful and in need of saving by divine grace. Pelagius argued that humanity and each person has deepest within them the image of God. Augustine won the debate and Pelagius was banned from the Roman Empire and excommunicated from the church. At the time Pelagius was referred to as a heretic.

The theology of original sin, formalised as part of Roman Catholic doctrine by the Councils of Trent in the 16th Century, certainly has made its way into North American culture and understanding of God. Thankfully there has also been a rebirth of the Celtic understanding that the light of God is within us as we are born. We are essentially good. Sometimes this will get buried depending on what happens in life...but we can always retrieve it and go back to the light of God deep within us. I find the Celtic prayers so simple and helpful in my daily living as a way of remembering the light within myself and others.

Scripture: John 1:1-9

In this reading from the Gospel of John, the writer refers to Jesus soon to be born in the flesh, "the true light, which enlightens everyone was coming to the world." But as we read the light enlightens everyone, not only Jesus. That everyone includes us, you and me. We have the capacity to live from this light and to look for this light in other people.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

Reflection

I love this story about Thomas Merton, the well know Catholic writer and spiritual teacher. He has been praying in his monastery in Kentucky. One day he has to go to the dentist so he goes into town. At the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, he has this experience of seeing the light of God in all the people around him. He writes:

At the center of our being
is a point of nothingness...
A point of pure truth
a point or spark which belongs entirely to God..
this little point of nothingness
and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.
It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.
It is in everybody, and if we could see it,
we would see these billions of points of light
coming together in the face and blaze of a sun
that would make all the darkness
and cruelty of life vanish completely ...

So go into you week knowing the light of God is within you AND in the people around you. Sometimes we may have to look hard...but perhaps in the looking we can be like Thomas Merton and see the points of light all around us. We can do this even when we are not going to the dentist!

Closing Prayer

The blessing of heaven,
the blessing of earth,
the blessings of sea and of sky.
On those we love this day
and on every human family
the gifts of heaven,
the gifts of earth,
the gifts of sea and of sky.
May it be so, Amen

(Prayer written by J. Philip Newell, Celtic Benediction and Celtic Treasurer)