The One Another People – Celtic Evangelism

1. Easter is early this year. With only 4 Sundays left before Palm Sunday, I don't want to start a long series. Rather, I want to do a little history lesson and then weave that story into our story.

2. Remember last Easter? Sadly, it was canceled. That had never happened before. And nothing has been the same since then. We live in a different world now than we did a year ago. The world has become more and more secular, divided, and angry.

3. If you watch the news or engage with people on social media, you find that arguments are more and more based in feelings and facts are dropped, ignored, or even despised. (Isaiah 59:14,15) Belief and obedience are demanded by both the right and the left and anyone who does not buy into and bow down to their version of secular faith is treated as a non-person.

4. How can we engage with this world? How can we take the Jesus story to people who already have their faith system in place (secular, religious, or a weave of both)? And what attitude and response is guaranteed to fail?

5. You've heard it said that "failure is not an option" but that is just not true; failure is very much an option and one that we have engaged far more often than we'd like to admit. In fact, when what we try fails, we blame the target and not our method ("people just don't believe in truth anymore")

6. We are facing the same situation that faced the Roman Catholic Church in the late 2nd century when it really wasn't even the Roman Catholic Church yet. We have barbarians at the gates. For them, the barbarians were the Celts, Gauls, Goths, Visigoths, Vandals, Franks, Frisians, Huns and Vikings.

7. From the end of the 2nd century, we have no historical record of successful missionary efforts to any of these people for hundreds and hundreds of years. The church had already moved from being a nimble, family and community based faith to a set of beliefs taught and enforced by powerful bishops.

8. And here is the way they tried to spread their faith: they would determine if a group was able to understand the gospel (literate, civilized). If not, they usually moved on and just spent their time consolidating their power and growing their local kingdoms, networking with other outposts of faith as they met in councils.

9. When they DID decide to enter a new area, they would build a church and then prepare the people to be acceptable in their faith, behavior, and dress so that they could come to that church. Everything was centered around the church. When it worked, the church was the lifeblood of the community. When it didn't – and it usually didn't – the priests would be killed or run out of the area. (former churches and manses in Scotland)

10. And then, one man changed everything. His name was Patrick. In the mid to late 400s, he was born in what we would call Wales. As a young man tending his sheep, he was swept up by pirates and sold as a slave to a family in Ireland. It took him six years to escape back over the water to Wales but he never forgot the wild, barbarian world of that island not so far away. He became a priest and then a bishop and he told the church authorities that he was going back to Ireland to win it for Christ. And no one thought he had a chance.

11. Missionaries had ventured into Ireland before but every one of them left quickly or were killed. But Patrick didn't do what others had done. He didn't build churches and call people to a set of beliefs and behaviors. He and his assistants would enter a new area and speak of Jesus. If the people were ready to hear, wonderful! If they were not, which was far more common, he would set to work among them – working with the sick, performing weddings and funerals, fishing and weaving and tilling the soil. (2 Cor.5:14-20)

12. They would work for months and months with the people until the people trusted them. Whenever anyone showed any interest in this strange community of servants, they were invited to join in any way they could. If they had questions, those would be answered but no one was demanded to believe anything; just join us in doing good. Just like Jesus. (Acts 10:38)

13. And for the first time in history, the church grew outside of the centers of faith at that time (Rome, Constantinople, and Alexandria among them). Patrick founded 700 churches in 28yrs and the Irish slave trade slammed to a halt – the first nation in history to ban slavery. Other forms of violence such as murder and intertribal warfare decreased dramatically.

14. Patrick had followed the example of Jesus in John 14; he became a paraclete. Just as Jesus was roundly criticized by the religious leaders of his day and Patrick was criticized by the Roman Church. Among the very few reliable bits of literature about Patrick are portions of his letters to Rome defending his actions!

15. Rome said the churches he was building weren't Roman, but Celtic (and that made them wrong). They didn't build stone churches. They didn't establish a ruling clergy. They worshipped wherever they were and spoke more about what God was doing in their lives than about transcendence. In other words, it was Christianity on the ground, wherever they went, acting as God's representatives to whomever they met on the way.

16. The Roman church was a top down church. You had spiritual leaders and you came to church to have church done in front of you. The Celtic church was a "one another" church. You were expected to work with the people, pray with them, listen to them, and stay with each other. God was brought into the middle of any discussion, any decision. The "one another" nature of the church included God – a three fold cord.

17. Church was a practical thing, a daily help. Their prayers showed how God had penetrated every action (lighting a fire, leaving the home, caring for the animals, taking a journey). In less than three generations, all of Ireland was Christian…at the exact same time that the lights went out in Europe and the Dark Ages ruled the mainland.

18. From Ireland, Columba went to Scotland. Aidan and his people moved to Northern England and worked with the Germanic Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians. Thousands of open church communities were set up in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Columbanus was sent

to Europe and, in 15yrs, set up communities in France, Switzerland, and Italy. Sixty communities were set up in one generation.

19. They were only stopped when they came up against the might of the Roman Church. The Catholic Church allied itself with kings and centers of power and they brought that to bear – even hunting down believers who were not obedient to Rome and didn't behave the way Romans behaved. "It was no longer 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do,' but, 'when anywhere, do as the Romans do.'"

20. In AD 670, all evangelism stopped as Rome took control and almost every single outpost of faith sputtered to a sad end.

21. Next week, we will look at exactly how Patrick and those early Christians not only thrived and spread the faith…but how, as the great historian, Thomas Cahill put it, the Irish saved civilization. For they kept the lights on and the faith grew and thrived there when it was dying elsewhere (the chaos and division in the Middle East that gave Islam room to grow and take over).

22. Philippians 1:20-21. If we include Christ in our "one another" and become a one another church…the lights can come back on.