

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on May 15, 2022.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always even to the close of the age.

Matthew 28:19-20

The core stories we have been studying this year are all important. But they are not all equally popular at any one time in history. Last week's passage in which Jesus teaches us to serve Christ in every human person seems to resonate with men and women in the 21st century.

This week's teaching is not as well received. Christians in the 19th century were inspired by Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations. These words motivated men and women to leave their homes and go to the far ends of the world to spread the Gospel. When people heard **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations**, their heads were filled with images of courageous Christians canoeing up an uncharted river in Africa or sharing the Gospel with aboriginal people in Asia. This was an age when missionaries would come back from overseas and regale churches with stories of teaching the Gospel to people who could not read or write. Evangelism had a positive public image.

That age has passed. We have different images that often come into our heads when we hear about the command to share the Gospel. So very often the pictures in our heads concerning evangelism include:

A sweating bombastic preacher seeking to inflict guilt,
A television personality seeking to raise money,
Impersonal people telling us how to live,
Manipulation through existential fear.

The modern cultural stereotypes surrounding sharing the Gospel often make Presbyterians find excuses to avoid learning how we might practice sharing our faith. We may have heard Jesus' command his people to go to the entire world, yet what we have experienced as evangelism is so off putting and unattractive that we do not want any part of it. We also tend to feel inadequate to the task. I don't know enough theology or my knowledge of the Bible is too limited for me to be of any use.

As we ponder Jesus' core command to make disciples, I would like us to learn a different model from the one we find so off putting. Let us go back and learn from one of the most successful missionaries in Christian History, St. Patrick. Who was this man Patrick and what can his life teach us about sharing the faith?

First of all, Patrick was not Irish. Patrick was born around 390 AD on the West Coast of England or Wales. He grew up in a middle-class family. They considered themselves to be part of the Roman Empire. The primary language in the family was probably Latin. His father was a deacon in the Church, though as a young man Patrick did not take the faith seriously.

The Irish at this time were a collection of barbaric Celtic Tribes. They made war on each other and their neighbors. Much like the Vikings of later times, the Irish would send out raiding parties to capture slaves and treasure. One day, sometime after 401 AD, a great fleet of black coracles swept up the west coast of Britain, probably into the Severn estuary and seized "many

thousands” of young prisoners. These prisoners were taken to the slave markets in Ireland. One of these Romanized youths was Patrick.

All of Patrick’s plans for his future were cut short. He quickly went from being a rather spoiled child of loving parents to becoming a shepherd-slave in the Irish district of Antrim. He became the property of a local king. The life of a shepherd-slave could not have been a happy one. The work of shepherds was bitterly isolated; months at a time were spent alone in the hills.

After six long years as a slave, Patrick sought to escape from this drudgery. One day he just took off. He walked some two hundred miles to the sea. He came to the port city of Wexford and talked some sailors into taking him with them on their way to the continent. Patrick went through some difficult times during his journey, but he finally made it back to his parents in England.

This person who arrived back in England was not the same carefree Roman teenager who left more than six years before. As one writer tells us:

Hardened physically and psychologically by un-sharable experiences, hopelessly behind his peers in education, he could not settle down. One night in his parent’s house, a man he knew in Ireland visited him in a vision: Victorious, holding “countless letters,” one of which he hands to Patrick, who reads its heading-vox hiberionacum, The Voice of the Irish. At that moment, Patrick heard the voice of a multitude crying: “We beg you to come and walk among us once more.” “Stabbed in the heart,” he is unable to read further- and so wakes up.

Try though he might, he could not put the Irish out of his mind. The visions increased, and Christ began to speak within him: “He who gave his life for you, he it is who speaks with you.” Patrick the escaped slave is about to be drafted once more- as St. Patrick apostle to the Irish nation.

The visions lead Patrick to go to France to receive a theological education. He then was ordained as a missionary Bishop and sailed to Ireland. In 432 AD, Patrick landed on Ireland’s shores. He was overwhelmingly successful in his mission to the Irish people. He was able to baptize thousands of people from the high kings to the common peasants that he loved so much.

In the last years of his life, he could look out over an Ireland transformed by his teaching of the Christian faith. He had established bishops throughout northern, central and eastern Ireland. Patrick could take pleasure in realizing that during his lifetime the Irish slave trade had been halted and other forms of violence, such as murder and intertribal warfare decreased. He died in 461. It was the Irish Church which Patrick founded that would preserve learning during the dark ages.

How did Patrick accomplish his mission? What were the keys to his success in sharing the Gospel with the Irish people? Patrick developed a form of sharing the Gospel that some have called Celtic Evangelism.

Celtic Evangelism begins with love. His experience among the Irish planted in Patrick a deep love of the people. No individual or group can share the Gospel unless it is motivated by love.

My first trip to Scotland occurred during college. After a semester in Vienna, I made my way to Scotland to visit my relatives. There were four of my grandfather’s sisters living in different corners of the country. One of the Sisters lived with her daughter in Aberdeen in the top east

corner of Scotland. I knew she was a member of a very conservative church. I arrived at Aunt Jessie's home one evening. She had company over to dinner to meet me. Just after I arrived and sat down in her living room, one of the guests turned to me and asked, "If you died tonight do you know where you would spend eternity?"

This person did not know me at all. This encounter made me feel like a cipher. I thought that it seemed like this guy must have had a quota of people he had to ask this question. He had no concern for me at all. He lacked all humanity and feeling. I have never been back to Aberdeen.

The practice of sharing the faith begins with love.

Celtic Evangelism is also rooted in community. St. Patrick did not go to Ireland alone. He took a dozen or so people with him including priests, seminarians and two or three women. He moved into a certain area and established a community. Patrick knew that Christianity is not a lone ranger religion. Jesus has called us into community. His love is demonstrated by the forgiveness and support found in true community. We need what the Celts called "soul friends" to help us grow in our discipleship.

Thus sharing the faith is not merely the job of individuals, but rather the task of communities.

This leads to one of the most important qualities of Celtic Evangelism and that is hospitality. How we welcome strangers and incorporate them into the community is at the heart of evangelism.

The stereotypical evangelistic method that many of us find off-putting involves three steps. First is the presentation of the Gospel. This can happen in many ways. But it involves sharing with a person why they need to have faith in Christ. It could be the sharing the old four spiritual law formula. Or it could start with the question I was asked, "If you died tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?" It could mean just a simple sharing of what God means to the person speaking.

The second step is decision. The purpose of the presentation is to get the person to say yes to a relationship with Christ. After a person has said yes, the third step is an invitation to be part of the fellowship.

Celtic evangelism is almost the reverse. Because Christ calls us to love all humanity, our first step is to invite people into fellowship. When they are part of the life of the community they become part of worship and groups where instruction and conversations take place. Life in community leads to growth in faith and finally commitment to Christ.

This is why hospitality is so important. Treating new people with respect and love opens the door for them to experience God's grace.

Another quality of Celtic evangelism is starting where people are. There is a wonderful story told about Aiden, one of Patrick's spiritual descendants. One monk had been sent from Iona to lead a mission to Northumbria, in the North of England, with no success. He came back complaining that it was no use sharing the faith with these backward people. Aiden replied.

It seems to me brother, that you have been unreasonably harsh upon your ignorant hearers; you did not offer them the milk of simpler teaching, as the apostle recommends, until little by little, as they grow strong on the food of God's word, they were capable of receiving more elaborate instruction and of carrying out the more transcendent commandments of God.

That is a beautiful way of saying that we are to begin where people are in their journey. We are to share how the Gospel helps them in their daily lives, their commitments and their concerns.

Lastly, Celtic evangelism uses both sides of the brain. Our experience of what we call traditional evangelism has been mostly left brain oriented. This means we share the gospel almost exclusively through reason, abstraction and logic. We teach stories to be understood in a linear way. Faith means getting people to affirm specific words.

Celtic evangelism uses the left-brain but it also was open to the wisdom of the right brain. It sought to share the faith through the use of intuition, imagination and experience. Art, music and poetry played a central role in teaching the faith.

We are living in a time often called post-modern. If the term postmodern means anything it means people no longer fully rely on linear left brain thinking, but are more open the truth that comes through the right brain.

A true sharing of the faith needs both sides of the brain working together.

What does all this mean for us today? How can Patrick's example inform how we live out the great commission today?

First it means we need to continue to build our community life, especially our commitment to hospitality. The greeting people get at the door, invitations to take part in a group, a friendly word are all vital to reaching out to others.

It will also mean continuing to experiment with music, arts and movement in worship in order to use both halves of our brain in sharing the faith. A service like our baptism renewal Sunday is one example. The beautiful ways our Sanctuary has been decorated for Christmas and Pentecost is another.

As individuals we can do two things. We can learn to simply invite others to come and try out our community. In John's gospel, Andrew heard Jesus and then went to his brother Peter and asked him to come and hear the words of Jesus. We can invite people to join us for worship or fellowship or mission. Sometimes a simple invitation is all people need.

We can also, when it is appropriate, share what God has meant to us. The Samaritan woman had been changed by her encounter with Jesus. She told others what he meant to her and they believed. Sharing the faith is not about theology, but merely telling the story of what God had done in your life.

Remember it all starts with love,
Love for God,
And love for others.
Which makes us want to share that love.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always even to the close of the age.