

THE REAL MESSAGE OF SAINT PATRICK
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, March 17, 2019
based on Ezekiel 33:30–32

Today is St. Paddy's day, so it is a prime opportunity to consider the story of St. Patrick, and what has happened to it, which brings some important messages for Christian living today. {prayer}

St. Patrick's Day is a prime example of how a deep religious tradition can be corrupted into cultural fluff. The story begins in fifth century Roman Britain, where Patrick was born in a Christian family. His grandfather was a priest and his father a church deacon, but Patrick as a youth was not really a believer. Then, at the age of sixteen, he was kidnapped by Irish pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland. He toiled in slavery for six years, but that time of hardship provided the occasion for a spiritual journey, in which he ultimately came to a deep faith in Christ, and engaged in an extensive practice of prayer. He also became prepared for his ultimate destiny as a missionary to the Irish, as he learned the Celtic language of the Irish; moreover, his master was a high priest of the Druids and chieftain, which enabled Patrick to learn all about the pseudo-magical practices of the Druid priests and the methods of tribal chieftains, which would very much help him later to bring the gospel effectively to the old Irish culture. Patrick's sojourn in Ireland is thus a prime example of the Biblical verse, "In all things God works for good for those who love God." (Romans 8:28)

In his spiritual autobiography, *Confessio*, Patrick tells of how, after six years in slavery, he heard a voice telling him that his ship was ready to sail. He escaped from his master, traveled some 200 miles to a port, and managed to get himself onto a ship which brought him back to Britain, where he was reunited with his family. He entered into Christian ministry, gained an education, and became a priest. But in spite of the fact that he was now in much improved circumstances, he heard God calling him to go back to Ireland.

Patrick would not be the first to take the gospel to Ireland. There were a few Christians already there in places, and a man named Palladius had been sent a few years before Patrick to be the first bishop of Ireland. The work of Palladius was described in a seven century text as follows:

"The fierce and cruel men of Ireland did not receive his doctrine readily, nor did he himself wish to spend time in a strange land, but he returned to those who sent him." [The Book of Armagh] Palladius, facing considerable hostility from Druid chieftains, bailed out; and it would be Patrick, a few years later, who would take up a most difficult assignment.

Why would Patrick even think about going back to the very place that had enslaved him? He seemed to have internalized the message of Jesus, who had said, "Love your enemies." (Matthew 5:44) He journeyed back to Ireland, and when he arrived, one of the

first places he went was to his old slavemaster, where he paid the man the ransom money for himself.

Patrick's mission in Ireland was risky from the start, and he suffered considerable hardships along the way; but ultimately he found enormous success—bringing thousands of Irish people to faith in Christ. Legend has it that he even drove the snakes out of Ireland, which is not true, since there were no snakes there to begin with. Scholars generally consider the snakes to be a metaphor for Druid superstitions.

After his death, on the date of March 17, people in Ireland began to acclaim him as a saint, although he has never been officially canonized in the Catholic church. For most of history, the memory of him moved people into quiet spiritual reflection, because here was a man whose life illustrated central themes of Christian living—that God can bring good out of difficult times, that deliverance comes to those who wait for the Lord, that God calls us not to ease but to a life of service, and that the call to love one's enemy can transform human lives. Patrick was appropriately remembered in Ireland for more than a thousand years as one who could inspire us all to follow Jesus more closely.

So what happened? How can it be that a day commemorating a man who lived in deep piety and inspiring self-sacrifice has now become a day when people get drunk on green beer? St. Patrick's day is a prime example of a theme that comes forth in multiple places in the Bible—that people may venerate a religious symbol or figurehead, but neglect the real message that God would give to them.

This theme was at the heart of that passage we heard from the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet during the exile in Babylon, and he continually brought to the people of Israel a very challenging message—that they needed to change their ways and turn afresh to God, in order that God could lead them in right paths. In Ezekiel 33, God gave to Ezekiel a brutally honest assessment of what sort of effect he was having. God said, "As for you [Ezekiel], your people are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.'" (Ezekiel 33:30) That sounds good! Ezekiel had gained renown; people knew about him and were talking about him, saying good things—he was an honored figure—and they were wanting to come hear him speak. But God continued, "My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to hear your words, but they do not put them into practice. Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain." (Ezekiel 33:31) Not so good. That people will hear God's word but not apply it to life is a pattern that has continued throughout history. As Jesus said, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'" (Matthew 15:7-8) God's word to Ezekiel finally concluded with a memorable image: "Indeed, to these people you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them

into practice.” (Ezekiel 33:32) God’s message to the people through Ezekiel had become like a pretty song playing in the background while people were doing other things.

St. Patrick’s Day is an example of that today. Few people pay attention to the real message of Patrick’s life, which would invite us to deep faith and self-giving service for the sake of people who are quite different from us. He has become instead an adornment for a generally frivolous holiday which people primarily associate with corned beef and cabbage.

But this then brings us to the other major aspect of St. Patrick’s day which has some interesting implications for today. More than anything, St. Patrick’s day has become an ode to all things Irish. Not only do people of Irish heritage like to celebrate the day, but everybody else pretends that they are Irish. This is a bit odd, since Patrick was himself was not Irish; he came from a family of Romans who had settled in Britain. Patrick is also often associated with the Catholic church; many a parish is named “St. Patrick’s.” But Patrick was not Roman Catholic either; in the fifth century, there was no such thing as Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox or Protestants; all the Christians in Europe were part of the same church. In reality, St. Patrick—who bridged the gap between Romanized Christian Britain and Celtic Ireland—is a prime example of the passage in Galatians which says, “You are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Nevertheless, the connection between St. Patrick and Irish culture became emphasized during a significant time period—when Irish people were experiencing oppression. In Ireland, St. Patrick’s day was officially established as a feast day in the church in 1631, and the popularity of the day increased all through the 1700’s. This was a time when the Irish people were especially struggling under the oppressive rule of the English crown. They mounted rebellions in 1641 and again in 1798, both of which failed. Interestingly enough, it was during this same time period that the color associated with St. Patrick changed. Early depictions of St. Patrick always showed him dressed in a sky blue cassock. But by 1798, his color had shifted to green, because the Irish had adopted green as their nationalist color. Patrick had become a symbol of Irish identity.

This pattern continued in America, especially in the 19th century, as Irish immigrants were experiencing severe discrimination. Anti-Irish sentiment was strong in America and culminated in the mid-nineteenth century in the so-called Know Nothing party, a nativist political movement which saw Irish immigrants as fundamentally un-American—because the Irish were just so different from “real Americans,” and they had a strange and “un-American” religion, being Catholic. The Know Nothings were a secret society and hence the name, since if anyone asked them about their activities, their standard response was “I know nothing.” But they actively propagated the view that Irish immigrants were a threat to true American identity. We might say, “Well, they certainly did know nothing.” How could anyone imagine that Irish people can’t really be American?

Or that Catholics can't really be American? But of course the same sort of thinking can be seen today, just with respect to different immigrants.

In that context, it is significant that Irish people did not suppress their particular identity but sought to celebrate their culture as something that contributed to American society—and St. Patrick was a positive figure to elevate. In cities across America in the nineteenth century, Irish communities began holding big St. Patrick's day parades, which had actually started in New York City in the eighteenth century, lifting up St. Patrick as a symbol of all good things Irish. The parade steps off today in Cleveland at 2:00.

Such parades might seem to have little to do with the real St. Patrick, but in the history of those parades there is a connection with an important theme in the Bible and in the real life of St. Patrick. In the Biblical story, Jesus especially reached out to people who were considered to be the lowly in society. St. Patrick likewise reached out to the people of Ireland who were not so highly regarded by the more civilized folks in Britain in his time, and who much later were looked down upon in our own American history. No one looks down on the Irish anymore; but the story of Saint Patrick can move us to likewise follow the example of Jesus and reach out in our own time to those who are on the margins and those that others are inclined to reject.

St. Paddy's day can be just fun and silly, and people often treat St. Patrick himself in the same way that the ancient Israelites treated Ezekiel—raising a toast while disregarding the message. But if we get past the frivolity, and pay attention to the real story, the life of St. Patrick can be a source of inspiration, because it is a story of how God can use an ordinary life to do extraordinary things. Early in life, Patrick was at the absolute bottom—a slave in a brutal culture. But through faith he became a part of a purpose of God in which he turned a painful experience into an outreach of love to the very people who had hurt him, and in the end he transformed a society. His story invites us likewise to trust in God, even in tough times, to overcome bitterness through forgiveness and a commitment to service, and to reach through every barrier to show God's love to all.