

Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
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A man enters the confessional. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. There was a pile of lumber in a vacant lot. Been there for weeks. So I helped myself." The priest says, "Stealing is a mortal sin, my son. Say three Hail Marys, two Our Fathers, and return the lumber." The next week the man goes into the confessional. "I know you told me to return the lumber, Father, but when I got to the lot...I don't know...I took some more." The Priest says, "Clearly, you need a stronger penance. I want you to pray the Rosary, recite the Queen of Heaven, and take back that lumber!" The following week, the man comes in. "Father, I did my penance, but when I returned to the lot, the lumber was just sitting there. I couldn't help myself. It's all at my house now." Grieved, the priest says, "My son, don't you know that your immortal soul is in danger. It's time for extreme measures. Tell me, do you know how to make a novena?" "No, Father, " the man replies contritely, "but if you have the plans, I have the lumber!"

Confession, private confession to a priest, is something we associate with the Roman Catholic Church—we see it in movies, in TV shows... in jokes—but this was not always the case. It in fact a gift from the Irish and other Celtic Christians. While you can see precursors among the early ascetics, confession took off among the Celts in Ireland and the British Isles in the 6th century, and from there, spread to the Continent and throughout Christendom.

This is important for us to understand about the historical Celtic Church. For all the celebration of Celtic Christianity for being creation-centered rather than salvation-centered, the sense of sin, reparations for sin, extreme austerity and asceticism--all these are equally part of Celtic Christianity and gave it its power and strength. The place of confession in the church is a powerful witness to that.

Now it needs to be said that the Celts' approach to confession was not what we see today in the Catholic church—"Bless me Father, for I have sinned" and the priest requiring three Hail Marys and a dozen Our Fathers. No, that kind of confession is too mechanistic, too crude and simplistic. It makes confession out to be a matter of putting your coins in a machine and it spitting out a receipt saying "debt paid." That's not what confession is supposed to be, not what confession was for the Celtic Christians. Confession for them was a far more personal...and more transformative experience.

You see, what made confession among the Celts so different, so innovative was that it was personal, private. Before this time, when a Christian sinned, they were compelled to do penance, *public* penance, which was intended to isolate and humiliate and demean. Sinners were shunned by other Christians, excluded from the main body of the church, considered the lowest of the low. When the Celtic church made penance private, they made much more obvious the true aim and purpose of penance, which is not punitive or vindictive but remedial, intended to rehabilitate the sinner, not punish him.

The penitent sinner was helped in this healing by a confessor, called a "soul-friend," *anamcara* in Irish, *periglour* in Welsh. These soul-friends were revered not for their office or status as

clergy, but for their wisdom and insightfulness. For, it was their work to diagnose the spiritual sickness behind the sin. The idea was that sin is just the presenting symptom of a disordered life, and sinning less a matter of breaking a rule as it is a disruption of the normal healthy workings of a soul and its relationship with God. Penance was then not about making up for the sin, but about getting at the soul's disease through an appropriate cure.

The work of the soul-friend was then to cure wounds of the soul, restoring what is weak to a complete state of health. Christ himself is, of course, the physician, but it is one's soul-friend who has to treat the sin with an appropriate penance. The books called 'penitentials,' that were written in abundance in the Celtic lands, systematized treatments for these confessors, setting out how, for each sin, there is a corresponding penance: recitation of psalms, prayer, fasting on bread and water, and at times bodily mortifications.

It's tempting to pick out at random some of the more extraordinary examples and hold them up to ridicule. I rather fancy the rule, "If someone argues with a cleric or a minister of God, he will fast for a week on bread and water." Sounds fair to me! Others are not so funny: "If a cleric has once or twice committed a theft by stealing of sheep, a pig, or other animal, he will fast for one year on bread and water and will pay back what he has stolen fourfold." Yeesh! Better not steal anyone's pig!

Yet, to focus on these oddities is to miss their underlying wisdom. Their grasp of the workings of the human soul is shown in the way the penitentials paired the eight virtues to the eight vices (deadly sins) in order to cure and heal them: moderation healed gluttony and drunkenness; generosity answered avarice; benevolence of heart remedied envy and hatred, humility cured pride. Strengthening a virtue was effective in counteracting its corresponding vice.

It is the soul-friend who helps with discerning the proper course of healing for the penitent, bringing medicine for the soul, supporting new challenges throughout one's life. As spiritual directors, the relationship was true friendship, with warmth and intimacy and honesty, and their wisdom was seen as a source of blessing. Yet it was not merely affirmative. There was challenge as well. As one penitential put it: "When you put yourself under the judgment or control of another, seek out the fire that you think will burn you most keenly, that is, him or her who will least spare you." For that is where you will grow the most. What strikes me about the soul-friend relationship is that it was a situation where one was known, truly known, seen for who one is, both the good and bad, by someone who cares about you and wants to help you be better. Who wouldn't want that?

To be honest, though, the whole practice of confession and penance can be rather startling to the modern mind with its post-Freudian approach to life, which tends to equate wholeness with fulfillment. But it is important to see that this Celtic asceticism is not negative, life-denying. After all, the monks among whom these penitential practices originally derived were anything but dour and negative men. Rather they were joyous and fulfilled souls, at one with themselves, with the world and with God.

Still, it needs to be acknowledged that the Celtic soul-friend tradition was tied to another characteristic of Celtic Christianity which is not so attractive—namely its tendency towards

spiritual perfectionism. You see, up this point in Europe, penance had been reserved for the “big” sins—murder, apostasy, sexual immorality. But the Irish and Welsh and British Christians were concerned as well with all the “little” sins that derail us. They saw sin and holiness not as a state, from which some might fall, but a matter of growth, progress. So it’s not just that some are sinners and some in a “state of grace”; we are all called to grow in holiness. Now this may sound comforting at first, but with that ability to grow came the expectation that we would always strive for to be better, to be perfect.

Nowhere else is this more powerfully described than in the writings of one Pelagius. Not much is known of Pelagius’ life, but we know he was a monk from western Britain who lived from roughly 360 to 430. Schooled in the austere teaching and practices of Celtic monasticism. Pelagius saw behavior and conduct as being every bit as important as belief and faith, if not more so. When he came to Rome around 400, he was appalled by the decadence and laxity he found there, and worked to reform their moral standards through his own personal example, living a simple and virtuous life, and by preaching against the evils of accumulated riches and a self-indulgent lifestyle. In his letters to his advisees, Pelagius expounded what we might call a “theology of perfectionism,” suggesting that it was possible to live a life without sin and extolling the importance of “ordering the perfect life,” that is, practicing chastity and poverty and consciously forswearing worldly pleasures, comforts and distractions. It takes struggle, striving and self-denial, living a life of extreme asceticism and self-mortification, having a single-minded, almost puritanical focus, but it could be done. We *can* achieve Christian perfection.

Clearly, Pelagius had a very high view of human nature, believing that humans are infinitely capable of virtue and self-improvement. God gave us the rules, Pelagius argued, and God knows what we are able to do, so we should be able to follow his directions. More than that, Pelagius made the uncompromising assertion: “since perfection is possible for humanity, it is obligatory.”

Pelagius’ writings caught the attention of several of his contemporaries in the church. Among them St. Jerome and St. Augustine, who were no moral slouches either, but they were greatly disturbed by Pelagius’ teaching on perfection. Pelagius, they decried, was guilty of pastoral malpractice, setting an impossible ideal for believers and encouraging spiritual elitism, holding that only monks, virgins and others living lives of extreme austerity could be saved. This left no hope for us normal people who find that we are always falling short. More critically, Augustine argued, Pelagius’ puritanical perfectionism put all the onus and responsibility on humans to save ourselves. Pelagius misunderstood the nature of grace, Augustine said. Grace isn’t just seen in God giving us rules and bidding us to follow them. Grace is God helping us every step of the way, freeing us from the chains of sin, enabling and aiding us to fulfill what God commands. Indeed, without grace actively working in our lives, we could do nothing, nothing good.

Well, Augustine’s insistent on the necessity and comprehensiveness of grace won out, and the Pope ended up excommunicating Pelagius and declaring Pelagianism a heresy. Yet Pelagius’ ideas didn’t really go away. You can see them in the “Social Gospel Movement” among Mainline denominations in the 19th and early 20th century and in the statements of many socially-minded Christians today—in the idea that it doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you do the right thing or at least support the right causes.

Indeed, the argument between Augustine and Pelagius, between Celtic and Roman Christians, has been going on in the church for centuries: with Pelagius and his followers insisting that we must strive for perfection and work out our salvation with fear and trembling, supplementing faith with virtue, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, and charity, as Peter says in our first lesson. To which Augustine and the Roman Church reply, “Yes, but you will never achieve perfection. We always need God’s grace to achieve any good.” To which Pelagius responds, “But that doesn’t mean you can take God’s grace for granted and just give in.” “Yes, but we are too weak to do it on our own.” Round and around we go.

Our own tradition, Anglicanism, has admittedly displayed both tendencies, emphasizing God’s grace at one time and human behavior at another. Thomas Cranmer and other English Reformers followed Augustine in insisting that we are “saved by grace through faith,” but there are other examples from the succeeding centuries that emphasize the importance of moral behavior -- Jeremy Taylor’s *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and of Holy Dying*, William Law’s *A Serious Call To A Devout And Holy Life* and William Wilberforce’s book, *Real Christianity*. This led the 20th century Swiss theologian Karl Barth to dismiss the British for being “incurably Pelagian.” What he said might have just as well described the whole of the Anglican and Episcopalian tradition!

So, what do we take away from this? The Celtic Christianity of the British Isles presents us with a different approach to sin and salvation than most of us are accustomed to, an approach which is in one respect exceedingly compassionate but in another intimidating and demanding, even exhausting. One of the benefits of learning about a new tradition, especially one that is so ancient and alien as that of the Celts, is that by being faced with new ideas, our old ideas, our assumptions, are challenged and we come to think more deeply about our own faith. That is certainly one of the aims of our exploring Celtic Christianity this month—to get us to think more deeply about our tradition, to see it in light of other ways of being Christian, that we might become more thoughtful, more faithful believers and followers of Christ. May this aim be realized among you today. Amen.