

THE HEALING POWER OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Psalm 84

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Avon Lake UCC
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(online worship only)

I don't have much in the way of Irish heritage, I don't drink green beer, I don't even love corned beef and cabbage, but I'm so happy to be celebrating St. Patrick's Day on this Sunday. I'm delighted that we have Irish music today. The color green reminds me that spring is almost here. And I am drawn to the story of St. Patrick.

Patrick is one of the lucky ones, call it the luck of the Irish if you want to. He was lucky in that he heard God's call clearly. He knew exactly what he was to do with his life. His purpose was to bring the Christian story, the good news of the gospel, to the people of Ireland.

He wasn't the first one to do so, but he was the most successful.

There were other missionaries in Ireland before Patrick. They went into the country aggressively and arrogantly, insisting that the native people begin to speak Latin, change their calendar, and dress differently. As you can imagine, this form of evangelism was met with resistance. People got the message quickly - we're not ok the way we are. We have to change everything about ourselves in order to be called Christian.

Patrick approached his vocation in a completely different way. First, he got to know the people of Ireland. He learned what was meaningful to them. He spoke their language. Most important of all, he communicated to them that he loved them and cared about their well-being. As he began to tell them about Jesus, about Jesus'

acceptance and grace and unconditional love, the content of Patrick's message and the way he delivered it were seamless. People saw grace in Patrick, so it was easy for them to understand the grace of Jesus. Patrick embodied unconditional love even as he told them about the unconditional love Jesus taught and lived. Patrick gently invited the people of Ireland into community. He didn't demand that they sign creeds or agree to every tenet of the faith. He believed that belonging would lead to belief (not the other way around), that being a part of a community of compassion, justice and service would help people form their faith much more effectively than having dogma pound into them through preaching and teaching.

So today we celebrate the memory of St. Patrick, whose legacy is relevant in our time and place.

As I said in my written communications to the church this past week, I had been dreading this week for a couple of months. I had been dreading the one-year anniversary of the pandemic and the shutdown, because I didn't know what words I had left to say that would provide encouragement and hope. But today I am feeling cautiously optimistic. All indications are that we are beginning to turn the corner on COVID-19. Even medical professionals, who are usually very hesitant to give any sense of false hope, are telling us that we can begin to imagine post-pandemic life.

And I am. I'm spending a lot of time thinking about how the world has changed, and how the church is called to change in response. How will we share the good news effectively to people who will be simultaneously excited about a return to public activities AND grief-stricken over so much that has been lost? Much about our world will be different, and I am convinced that some of the changes will be for the good.

So I am looking ahead, looking forward, making plans for when we will re-open, but I am also taking a moment to reflect on the year we have just concluded. Do you remember the pattern of the language in the first creation story in Genesis, chapter 1? There are six days of creation. At the end of each day, God looks around at all that has been created. It is almost like you can picture God taking a deep breath, a moment for reflection, and then God says, "It is good." Night and day, it's good. Sea and sky, it is good. Plants, animals, fish, birds: it's all good.

Then on the seventh day, after the six days of creation are complete, God takes one whole day to stop and reflect. The first Sabbath Day. Because we can't reflect and give thanks if we never stop.

I recommend that you take a sabbath break this week. Take a moment to stop everything else you're doing and give thanks for the ways you have been sustained during this past year. You have survived. We have all survived something difficult, something for which we were not prepared. I know it's not over yet, but this one-year mark is a milestone, so congratulate yourself for the resilience you've shown this past year. And you've done it on top of all of the other responsibilities of life which did not stop, some of which became much more difficult. We have survived, and we've done it in the midst of a year of intense political division, a year of reckoning over America's legacy of racism.

Some of you are doing it while living with cancer, or while caring for a loved one who is ill. Some of you are surviving the pandemic while working full-time and parenting students who are going to school online. Some of us have lost loved ones during this past year. Let us give thanks for the ways we have been sustained by one another, by

God's love, by our fierce belief in hope and in the power of love to overcome all obstacles and divisions.

I am so proud of how this church has coped over the past year. We have supported one another with cards, phone calls, Doorstep Dinners and more. We have supported our mission partners with financial gifts, meals, Christmas presents, and volunteer hours. We have prayed for each other and for our world. Our Thrift Shop is thriving. We have gathered virtually for Bible Study, support groups, Stephen ministry, team meetings, Wednesday evening prayer and Sunday morning worship. We are completing a major renovation of our building, making a new space available for faith formation for children and adults. I hope you'll join me in taking a deep breath, reflecting, and giving thanks for God's sustaining, encouraging love.

I have received emails, texts and phone calls over the past year - you letting me know how you've been coping. You've told me how prayer has helped. Wednesday night prayer service has made a difference. Listening to uplifting music, meditation, practicing gratitude, staying connected to the church through service and through Sunday morning worship. The word for all of that is spiritual practice. It has been a source of healing and sustenance. Those who had that spiritual practice muscle in shape before the pandemic had a head start, but many people learned early on that they would need to find that strength, and they did. We have found healing together as we have practiced our faith in so many ways through this past year.

In Psalm 84 the psalmist describes worship as an experience of joy, one that the soul yearns and pines for. Being in worship is like being at home. "Happiness belongs to those who live in your house and can praise you all day long. Happy are the pilgrims

who find refuge in you.” Worship is a spiritual practice that reminds us of who we are and who God is calling us to be. Worship both grounds us and lifts us up. It’s paradoxical, but worship, at its best, does both. In a world that seems chaotic, worship helps us to remember that our feet are firmly planted in God’s love; we are centered in God’s values. And when so much of life seems mundane, worship causes us to look up, to be aware of that feeling of transcendence that causes our hearts to soar.

One of the young people I’ve worked with recently has been in a time of life crisis, questioning much about her life. The last time we were together, she told me about her future plans. She described a life for herself that would be perfectly fine, manageable, safe and secure. There was nothing wrong with what she was saying, but there was nothing right about it either; something was missing. I listened to her, trying as hard as I could to not be judgmental, to have an open mind and heart, but what I kept thinking was, “You’ve set your sights too low. God has more in mind for you.” Now it’s not that I think she should try to run up the career ladder, or earn a million dollars; it’s just that nothing about her plans caused me to see joy or passion in her eyes. My prayer for her is that she makes some space in her life for listening and reflection, to hear God’s call in her life. That is my prayer for everyone of us, because God calls everyone to a life of joy and meaning and purpose. No one is left out. It’s just a matter of whether or not we hear, whether or not we’re listening. Listening is one of the most essential of the spiritual practices. When we listen to God’s call, we will hear that what God has in mind for us - as individuals and collectively - is a life that is far beyond survival, a life where we thrive. A life where we discover our God-given gifts, remember

that we are loved beyond measure, and use all that we have been given to help the world to thrive.

I love thinking about how God has been at work in all of us during this time, planting seeds we haven't even been aware of. I believe that we are going to emerge from this experience as new and better people. I wonder if we might re-enter our world the way Patrick entered Ireland, with a deep love for people who are hungry for community, for service, for grounding and for connection with the divine. How might we bring the good news to a world that has been grieving but has had no way to express it? How will we embody the unconditional, accepting love of Jesus for people who have lived through extreme anxiety? I am imagining a period of growth for our church. People are longing desperately for the news we have to share - of a God whose power sustains and heals.

After the bubonic plague devastated Europe in the mid-1300's, there was a flourishing of art, culture and learning, one of the most prolific and creative periods in human history - we call it the Renaissance, a word that literally means "rebirth."

At the beginning of 1665, when Isaac Newton was twenty-three years old, he returned to his native village for a period of two years to escape the plague that had closed down Cambridge University where he was a student. He later wrote that these years were his most fruitful and creative, and recalls in particular that in 1666 he wrote his theories of motion and gravity. 1666 has been called a "miracle year" because of the importance of Newton's work in that year following a plague.

What if 2021 is remembered as another miracle year, another renaissance? Another year of human flourishing and creativity? Our spiritual practices during this

time can lead towards a rebirth of our souls, our church, and indeed, the world God loves.

May it be so!