

SLD07.10.11 15th Ordinary Summer Series on Sacred Communities
The Iona Community
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
Jill Oglesby Evans

"A Thin Place of Sharp Remembering "

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

This text carries relevance to us on a number of levels. An overarching question for all who seek to nurture disciples of Jesus Christ, as we do, is "just what is it that makes for fertile soil these days?" What kinds of teaching styles, and communities, and spiritual practices create and support the conditions for people today to hear the Word and understand it, to embed in their hearts the seed of God's Spirit and bear fruit from it?

We at Emory Church have been asking these questions for a long time, and this summer we're exploring ways that different "sacred communities" over the ages have attempted to answer them. But first we were introduced to five practices we believe make for fruitful congregations in any age: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission, and extravagant generosity. These are, and will be, listed on the front page of our bulletins throughout this series.

In the light of those characteristics, so far we have examined the 1st century church in Acts and the 4th century Egyptian desert mothers and father. Today we move 6th century Scotland to take a look at both the founding principles and the modern day practices of the Community of Iona. And here, too, today's scripture has a kind of ironic connection, for the rocky shores of a remote island off the coast Western Scotland seems an unlikely place for the Word to take root and bear fruit. But Celtic legend holds that Iona is a "thin place," a place where the veil between heaven and earth is especially *thin*, where connection to God seems effortless, and ephemeral signs of God's presence seem almost palpable. In a "thin place," the divine is more easily sensed.¹ The island of Iona is such a place, holds Celtic spirituality, so despite its rocks and thorns and hungry birds, bear the fruit of Christ's seed it did, from the moment the Irish monk Columba set foot on its shore in 563 C.E.

Which is to say, the community of Iona has been around a looong time. So long, in fact, that in order to cover, or at least skim over, everything I'd like us to know about Iona, I need to divide its history into three segments: The 6th century Iona of St. Columba, the early 20th century Iona of George MacLeod, and the current ministries of the Iona community today.

¹ <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/thinplaces.htm>

I had hoped to explore also Iona's sister community of Lindisfarne in England, and indeed, some of our prayer in today worship comes from Lindisfarne. But there just isn't time to cover the history and influences of both communities. Suffice it to say that both communities continue to be fertile sources of the theological and liturgical riches of Celtic Christianity.

Now a word about Celtic Christianity before we begin.

Perhaps you've noticed how popular it's become these days. Many booksellers, religious and secular, offer a "Celtic" section, because, well, these days, "Celtic" sells.² But much of what is offered up today as Celtic Christianity is cleaned up and romanticized. Indeed, "in the interest of separating fact from fiction, the Iona Community recently commissioned Ian Bradley, a lecturer in church history at Aberdeen University, to write a biography of Iona's founder, Columba, upon the fourteen hundredth (!) anniversary of his death."³

Celtic Christianity is deeply rooted in its understanding of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. "Celtic Christians believe that when the Word became flesh in Jesus, a new significance was given to the material order and human affairs."⁴ That is, God could be found, enjoyed and praised in all of creation including nature, animals, and all dimensions of personhood. "The Celtic approach to God," remarks Celtic scholar Esther de Waal, "opens up a world in which nothing is too common to be exalted and nothing is so exalted that it cannot be made common."⁵

So it should come as no surprise that, rather than portray St. Columba as a withdrawn ascetic or somber monk, Bradley describes him as part pilgrim, part penitent

² C. Michael Hawn, Gather Into One. Praying and Singing Globally, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Cambridge, UK, 2003. f.n. 4, p.192.

³ Ibid. p. 192.

⁴ Ibid. p. 195.

⁵ <http://www.celticpilgrimage.org/esther.htm>

and part politician.” A pilgrim because he traveled from his native Ireland to the remote Scottish isle of Iona to establish a new Christian community there. A penitent because he led a simple and disciplined life, observing the seven daily prayer offices as well as chanting all 150 psalms before sunrise. And a politician because he built a reputation for forging relationships with local kings and founding and binding communities of churches and monasteries.

Given that most of Scotland fell north of Hadrian’s wall, it had been excluded from the unifying effects of the Pax Romana, or peace of the Roman Empire. Rife as Scotland was with competing, combative tribes, Columba’s relationship building among them was no small accomplishment. Remarks Bradley, “Both king making and church planting ranked high on Columba’s agenda. He may even have been the first religious in Europe to consecrate kings, functioning on occasion more as a Celtic chieftain than a humble monk.”

At the same time, notes de Waal, “Celtic peoples know suffering, deprivation, exile...but have learned through this to find the light in the darkness.” Columba’s principles of a disciplined life balanced by periods of intense solitude, active political engagement, and identification with those who suffer and experience oppression continue to inspire the vision and work of the Iona community today, in which they continue “to attempt to marry the work of peace-making and political engagement with the practice of prayer.”

Certainly the legacy of Columba was paramount to the Rev. George MacLeod of the Church of Scotland, who, in 1938, founded the modern Iona Community. “Much to the amazement of parishioners and clergy, MacLeod left a thriving parish ministry in industrial Govan, the dock area of Glasgow, in order to experiment with a new way of theological preparation that would bring together industrial workers and ministers into

community. MacLeod's main focus was on the education of ministers, so he set off to the small island of Iona with twelve young ministers and artisans, equally divided, to rebuild the ruins of the old Iona Abbey established there by the Benedictines in the thirteenth century.⁶

"As the plan evolved, the two craftsmen and theologians learned from each other. They spent their summer months on the island in study, work and worship, and their winter months in an industrial urban setting ministering in housing projects and experimenting with different ways of living in Christian community." From the beginning MacLeod intended to use Iona not as a permanent residence but as a place for training and an impetus for mission.

The Iona experiment, MacLeod stated forthrightly, was to be based on community, worship, and laity. Leadership, including in worship, was to be shared by all. Times of retreat on the island were to be balanced by ministry in industrial Govan, and their twice daily worship was to remain central to life on the island.

"As the community survived World War II and settled into the mid-1950's, its mission became more global, its focus growing beyond the challenges of urban Scotland to peace, poverty, and injustice in the Two-Thirds World." (Hawn p. 201)

Besides work, worship and mission, MacLeod also energetically addressed the loss of vision and mission on the part of the Church of Scotland. It was his hope that his Iona experiment would encourage the state church to find a renewed identity over against the dominant Victorian piety of his day.

To this day, helping the traditional church discover a renewed identity remains a primary motif in the work of the Iona community, particularly as led by the creative and dynamic influence of what is called the Wild Goose Worship Group, founded by John

⁶ Ibid. p. 197.

Bell and Graham Maule. In a fascinating and collaborative process of its own, the Wild Goose Worship Group of Iona has, since 1980, developed an astonishing array of workshops and worship experiences featuring liturgical innovation and music reflecting Iona's theology of prayer and social justice. John Bell himself is known around the world as a hymn writer, workshop leader and author with a primary passion for congregational song. You'll see his name on some of the hymns and responses we're singing today.⁷ In fact, because of what I've learned these last weeks about Bell and the Iona community, much with the help of Pauline's research, we'll start seeing Bell's his name from time to time in our bulletins.

In addition to an egalitarian and worship centered community, and liturgical renewal, MacLeod also emphasized the development of an inclusive and ecumenical church "whose welcome is for all," the importance of ministering in relevant ways to young people, and the view that "all life should be a Sacrament," all of which values continue to pulse through the Iona community.

The Community today, which describes itself as "a dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship"⁸ remains committed to "rebuilding the common life" of its members. Its full members commit to live by a fivefold rule. (You'll hear the term "rule" from time to time as we study these different communities. A "rule" is a framework for living to which members covenant together.) The rule or framework for living for full members of the Iona Community today include: 1) praying and Bible study; 2) sharing money, including the giving of 10% of disposable income (after taxes, insurance, and pension – they've really thought this through); 3) sharing time including

⁷ http://www.united-church.ca/files/getinvolved/events/worship-matters-2011_speakers.pdf

⁸ <http://www.iona.org.uk/>

for recreation, physical activity, and family; 4) meeting with fellow members, including three plenary sessions on the mainland and a week on the island each year; and 5) working for peace and justice, both locally and internationally. (Hawn p. 202)

While the majority of Iona's two hundred members are in Britain, the present community is a global, ecumenical movement of over 1400 Associate Members and about 1600 Friends from many denominational traditions in the United States, Africa, India, Australia, and New Zealand. Visitors, pilgrims, arrive daily for brief or longer stays on the island, where they are supplied with simple food and lodgings, worship twice a day, and a chore or two to accomplish.

A current brochure about the community describes Iona's worship today as relevant and challenging, inclusive and accessible, and reflective of the Community's engaged spirituality and concern to "find new ways to touch the hearts of all." "You do not have to be a churchgoer to feel at home in an Abbey service, nor need people be experienced or ordained before they can lead worship here. It is a place for everyone," reads the booklet.⁹

Consider Iona through the lens of our list of characteristics of fruitful congregations: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission, and extravagant generosity. What do you think?

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁹ <http://www.iona.org.uk/OurWorship.php>