

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on January 31, 2021.

AIDAN: SHARING THE FAITH

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

Today we continue our series on men and women who illumine for us some special aspect of our Christian faith. The last two weeks we focused on English speaking people from the modern age. These people lived in a time we can easily understand. Today we go back in time almost 1400 years to the early days of the spread of Christianity. We focus on the life of Aidan who models for us how to share the faith with others.

While the time of Aiden may be very different from our own, for some of you the geography is familiar. About ten years ago a group of adults went on a journey to England and Scotland that followed the footsteps of Aidan. One Sunday we worshipped in the Abby on the Island of Iona. There was another day spent on Lindisfarne where Aiden served as Bishop. There was also a side trip to an historical museum called Bede's World. The Venerable Bede was a monk who wrote the first history of the Christian church in England in 731AD. It is in this book that we can read the biography of Aidan.

Who was this monk called Aidan and what can he teach us about sharing the faith?

We do not exactly know when or where Aidan was born. Bede does not give us information on his early years. We believe he was born in the North of Ireland sometime around 590AD. In his teens he became a monk and traveled to the Island of Iona.

Iona is a small island off the west coast of Scotland that measures one mile by three miles. In 563, St. Columba and his followers landed to found a monastery. The purpose of this monastery was to be a center of mission to the mainland. The Picts, Angles and other tribes in Scotland and Northern England were pagan. Columba had the hope that using the waterways his monks could bring the faith to the mainland.

Aidan arrived on Iona in the early days of the seventh century. He was a gentle soul who cultivated peace and love, purity and humility; he was above anger and greed, and despised pride and conceit; he set himself to keep and teach the laws of God and was diligent in study and in prayer.

A request came to Iona from the king of Northumbria to send monks to help evangelize his people. King Oswald became a Christian while in exile. Upon his return he wanted his people to learn his faith. The leader of the Iona Community sent one

group of monks who failed at their task. Aidan was then conscripted to go to Oswald's court.

Aidan's humble style was successful in spreading the good news of Jesus among the Angles. Oswald allowed him to found a monastery on the tidal Island of Lindisfarne which is known to this day as Holy Island. Aidan died on August 31, 651 while leaning against the buttress of a church in Bamburgh. His body was taken to be buried on Lindisfarne. By the end of his life he could look back at many accomplishments with new monasteries in Northumbria and the border country of Scotland. The Angles had become a Christian people. Aidan illumines for us what it means to share the faith.

Evangelism

Sharing the Gospel

These are words that strike terror
into the hearts of most Presbyterians.

It is not merely fear that surrounds this word.

Evangelism has many negative images associated with it.

A sweating bombastic preacher seeking to inflict guilt.

Impersonal people telling us how to live.

Manipulation through existential fear.

So, we Presbyterians find excuses to avoid learning how we might share our faith effectively with others. We know Jesus commanded his people to go to all the world, yet what we have experienced as evangelism is so off putting and unattractive that we do not want any part of it.

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

Celtic Evangelism begins with love. Aidan was a man of humility and love for people. When he traveled, he would not ride a horse, he preferred to walk so that he could interact with people as he journeyed. No individual or group can share the Gospel unless motivated by love.

I may have shared before my experience from over forty-five years ago in Germany. I was walking down a main street in Munich with a friend. We were wearing down jackets, which in those days marked us as North Americans. A person came up to us and said in English, "Do you believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior?" We both said, "Yes we do!" Whereupon the man could not seem to take yes for an answer. Without missing a beat, he began his testimony. It was as if his testimony was pre-recorded. He recited in a very rote manner.

This encounter made us feel like ciphers. He seemed to have a quota of people he had to share with each day. He had no concern for us at all. He lacked all humanity.

True Evangelism begins with love and concern for others.

Celtic Evangelism is rooted in community. Aidan did not go to Northumbria alone. He took others with him. He moved into a certain area and established a community. Aidan 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. It was the quality of the life of the community that attracted others to it.

Thus, sharing the Gospel 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 Evangelistic method that many of us find off-putting involved three steps. First is the presentation of the Gospel. This can happen in many ways. But it involved sharing with a person why they need to have faith in Christ. It could be the sharing the old four spiritual law formula. It could start with the question, “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.

Therefore, 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. As you might recall Aidan was not the first person sent to Northumbria. One monk named Cormac had led a mission of monks to Northumbria with no success. He came back complaining that it was no use sharing the faith with these backward unteachable 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.

Aidan was also successful because he preached by example. Aidan was not only a man of words; he lived his faith. He was humble, loving and disciplined in his own life. His encounter with individuals in daily life reflected his teachings on divine love.

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 about God.

Celtic evangelism used 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 to truth that comes through the right brain.

A true evangelism needs both sides of the brain working together.

What does all this mean for us today. How can Aidan's work illumine and inform our common life?

It means we need to continue to build our community life, especially our commitment to hospitality. When things return to normal, we must be ever mindful of the simple acts such as greeting people at the door, invitations to take part in a group, a friendly word are all vital to reaching out to others.

It will 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 way our Sanctuary is been decorated for Christmas and Pentecost is another.

Sharing the faith can mean different things at different times. Sometimes sharing the faith means telling the basic story of Jesus life, death and resurrection to someone who has never heard it. There are other times sharing the faith means being brave enough to share how God has acted in your life. But there other times sharing the faith means simply inviting others to come and try out our community.

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