

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Easter

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Today I am going to reveal the “secret sauce” of life that makes every recipe, every scenario, every story come out perfectly!

About two months ago in the midst of Lent, I wrote a sermon that included the story of St. Patrick. We didn't get a chance to speak about it then, and I am going to return to that story. Patrick was a fairly typical adolescent in a comfortable home in what is modern Britain. He later tells us that while he received religious instruction, it wasn't of great interest to him. His life was turned upside down when marauders from barbarous Ireland captured and enslaved him. He was taken to a very, very remote place in Ireland and compelled to tend flocks. What he had to cover and feed himself was barely enough to keep him alive.

We can imagine Patrick doing a mental inventory of resources he might tap: Family and friends? None at hand. Savings or money? None. Imagination? Nothing occurred to him. Patrick tells us in his later autobiography that he turned to prayer, because he had absolutely no other place to turn. Prayer became his constant companion from the time of his waking to the time he was blessed by sleep. I can't tell you that some blessed answer quickly gave him hope. But after a period of years, he became aware of visions. He was attentive to those visions and did as they suggested. This led to a most serendipitous sequence by which he gained his freedom.

This is where we would likely declare a happy ending to the story. But God is always doing better things for us and for the world than we have the wisdom to seek. Patrick experienced that. After he returned home, the visions continued and Patrick could not escape the clear message that he was being called to go back to Ireland and minister to the people who enslaved him.

After some training, Patrick answered the call. He didn't arrive in Ireland with blustery sermons or preaching. With gentleness and reverence, he gave an accounting of the hope that was in him, the fruit of his constant prayer. His gentle and reverent witness changed the culture. By the time Patrick completed his ministry, both slavery and warfare were greatly reduced in Ireland.

So why am I returning to this story? None of us are suffering to the extent Patrick was. And yet, there are days when we feel like we are! We too long for freedom, freedom to “walk about the cabin,” freedom to worship together, freedom to exchange hugs. And in today's Gospel, Jesus is speaking directly to all his future disciples like us who will feel this way. Here is a very, very loose paraphrase of what Jesus says in today's Gospel: “The secret to the secret sauce is that **there is NO secret!** Just keep doing the things that I have taught you to do, and my love WILL be more fully revealed to you; you will come to know a Spirit of Truth who is always with you and guides you.”

The very most basic thing Jesus taught is to do is pray. He taught the Lord's Prayer very early in his ministry. From Patrick, we learn that the bigger part of prayer is not speaking. The bigger part of prayer is not pretty words. The bigger part of prayer is listening, being attentive to God's action. This is exactly what led to the story in today's first lesson. St. Paul's sermon to the Athenians was not the result of a well-crafted strategic plan. The preceding verses tell us that when Paul arrived in Athens, he did what

he always did; he went to share at the synagogues, where he expected to find an audience with the framework to hear his testimony about the Messiah. But the leaders of Athens took him to the place of debate and challenged him. It was then that the Spirit of Truth gave him the perfect way to share his testimony within the worldview of this Gentile audience, by pointing to their tribute for an unknown God.

I imagine all of you have been to a restaurant that had a fancy burger on the menu and promised some “secret sauce.” But ultimately, it’s hard to beat ketchup and mustard. Prayer is the ketchup of this life; faith is the mustard of this life. Those two ingredients—prayer and faith—are all we need for the living of these times. These are anxious times. We would love to know so many things about how the story will evolve, and uncertainty about that makes us more anxious. But if we can remember to pray as Patrick prayed, to listen and to watch for how the Spirit of Truth beckons us to perhaps play a part in writing the evolution of this story, we WILL have a new experience of just how trustworthy Jesus’ promises in today’s Gospel are. We WILL have a new experience that God is always doing better things for us than we have the wisdom to seek.

We may not be able to preach like Peter. We may not be able to pray like Paul. But we can cling to the love of Jesus, and we can tell of the love of Jesus. That’s all we need for the living of these days. May our faith be strengthened that we DO have a God who broods over all of us as a mother over her children.
Amen.