

“Thin Places and Sacred Spaces” I Corinthians 12: 4-26
Rev. Beth Hennessy, Sept. 4, 2016 Westminster Presbyterian Church

As many of you know, a couple of years ago my husband and I were fortunate to travel with our family to Ireland and Scotland through a Lily Clergy renewal grant. The focus of the grant was for my husband to explore Celtic music and spirituality. The majority of our time, 3 weeks, was spent in Ireland. We traveled around the Irish countryside visiting Thin Places, sacred sites in Celtic Christianity where the veil between the earthly and divine is considered to be at its most thin, a place where one can sense the divine more readily. It is a place that is not just pretty but where the soul is transformed.

We visited cliffs, holy wells, and ruins of early churches and monasteries. We were awe-struck by the raw beauty of the cliffs, what John Philip Newell calls the cathedral of earth, sea and sky. Though, I will confess to being ever so slightly hysterical at being that close to the divine, especially seeing my teen age children sitting on cliff edges with their feet dangling over the side. And, we were moved by the quiet, sacred feel of holy wells like St. Brendon’s well on tiny Valentia Island, off the southern coast of Ireland. It was about as remote as you can get. We were told to drive until there wasn’t a road and then to keep driving. It was well worth the rugged journey. It was a beautiful sunny day with a brilliant view of the sea. This is where, as the story is told, St. Brendan sailed to Valentia across Dingle Bay and scaled the cliffs just in time to baptize and anoint 2 dying pagans. The well is still a sacred place with pictures and rosaries hung on it. There were benches for services and three very old, crudely chiseled stone crosses nearby dating back to the 8th century. It is believed that pilgrims would come and circle the well stopping at each cross to pray.

Now the wonderful thing about Thin Places is you don’t have to go to Ireland or Scotland or travel far at all to experience them. Thin places are all around us and are different for each of us. They are the places where you feel most connected to God. They are the places you feel renewed and transformed. For some of you it may be in our sanctuary or here in this chapel. For others it may be in your own garden and for others a special place you get away to for renewal. It’s wherever you feel that veil between the earthly and divine at its most thin, a place where you go to feel transformed.

Now you may wonder what this has to do with today’s reading from I Corinthians. Paul is talking about the spiritual gifts we each are given and how we live together as the body of Christ. I believe that Paul is doing more than organizing a division of labor in the church. He is talking about the presence of Christ that exists in community, in our interconnectedness. I believe that Thin Places exist between people in relationship with one another. We create sacred space when we are sharing our gifts and the love of God with one another. Whether you are writing a note or taking food to someone who is ill, helping with reading and homework in Energy, sharing your gift of music, knitting a prayer shawl or being a listening ear or a ride to church...whatever your gift is...and we all have one...you are creating sacred space and sharing transformational love of God as the body of Christ. When Tom and I take home communion to those no longer able to attend worship, we are taking all of you with us, the body of Christ that is Westminster church, creating sacred space.

When we were in Ireland, we spent one week in the little town of Miltown Malbay, in County Clare, at the Willie Clancy School of Traditional music. There, my husband Bill took classes to improve his whistle playing skills in the mornings and in the evening we had the opportunity to hear traditional music played in pubs at “trad sessions” by kids up to senior citizens. One thing we learned early on was the difference between traditional music played by a Ceilidh band for a dance and the music played in the pub, or someone’s home or a street corner. Music played in a Ceilidh band is very precise. It’s music for dancing. My husband’s whistle teacher talked about how nerve wracking it was for her to play in a Ceilidh band, mistakes were not allowed. But trad sessions are organic and communal. Anyone of any skill level is welcome. People come and go, and some may even change instruments mid tune. It’s not about reading music, but listening and connecting. Finding your place to join in or maybe starting a new tune all together that others listen to and learn. The result when it all comes together is amazing, much like when we all bring our gifts together to serve God.

So these thin places are sacred spaces and relationships that transform us; that bring us closer to the divine, to God. There is another way we can experience this transformation. When we were at Chautauqua to hear the Rev. Dr. William Barber I was reminded of the transformational power of working for social justice, of standing with those whose voices are being silenced or threatened. I first became aware of this in April 1968. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had just been assassinated. My father and mother, who were active in the civil rights movement and fellow Baptists, were devastated. My dad at the time was the pastor of First Baptist Church in Jamestown. He and the pastor of the black Baptist church organized an ecumenical march that brought members of the black community on one side of town and with members of the white community on the other side of town together. We marched separately at first, from our own neighborhoods then joined together to walk downtown for a worship service to grieve and begin healing. I was 10 and it is something I will never forget...the walking in silence, the sound of our footsteps on the pavement and the emotional joining together with our black friends and neighbors. It helped form who I am today and was the first of many marches in which I’d participate.

Most recently, my husband and I gathered with hundreds of others, including a few Westminster folks, on Niagara Square after the Pulse nightclub shooting to stand in solidarity with the LGBTQ community. There were rainbow flags, American flags and people of all faith traditions. That space, Niagara Square, became sacred, a thin place where people came together to grieve and support one another while standing up for LGBTQ rights. The evening was beautifully concluded with song by the Buffalo Gay Men’s Chorus. These gatherings of solidarity are more important now than ever. In a political environment where hate filled rhetoric is being ramped up higher and higher it is our call as followers of Christ to show God’s love and justice for all of God’s children.

So, whether it’s at places you visit where you feel renewed and transformed or through acts of compassion and generosity or advocating for and standing with people who are being rejected and despised: thin places are being formed all around us. The presence of Christ is revealed in our life together when the human and the divine meet – Where we rejoice weep together, one body offering renewal and transformation to the world.