

Fourth Sunday of Lent 2018
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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“And when Irish eyes are smiling, sure they’ll steal your heart away!”

Ahh... Saint Patrick’s Day: a day on which people celebrate Ireland’s most famous saint by doing *saintly* things – like drinking too much green beer, and eating green bagels! (Yes, I know that Saint Patrick’s day is *next* weekend, but I will be away at a conference, so I decided to preach about him today!)

If we went to Short Pump town center today and did a survey, I suspect that most people would be able to tell you that Saint Patrick’s Day is March 17. And they might know something about St. Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland.

But if you asked them much more about this famous Irish preacher, I suspect they would want to get out their phone and ask Google.

The Patrick we know from the holiday is a cartoon and caricature of the one who walked the green hills of Ireland.

For instance, did you know that Patrick was not born in Ireland? He was actually born in that part of Britain which was under the control of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the 5th century. His father worked for the Roman government (which is why, in South Philly, I heard a boy named Giuseppe Accavino proudly announce that St. Patrick was actually Italian!)

Patrick’s life changed when he was 15 years old. Irish pirates attacked Patrick’s British village. They killed most of Patrick’s family.

They dragged the 15 year old Patrick to Ireland, and sold him into slavery. Imagine what this must have been like for this teenager. The man who owned Patrick put him to work, tending his farm animals.

It was a horrible existence for this teenage boy. But Patrick had one thing to cling to. His faith. Through the long years of his slavery, Patrick’s *prayer to Christ* was the one thing that gave him peace.

At the age of 22, Patrick escaped from his master. He walked 188 miles, snuck on to a ship, and eventually found his way home to Britain. He was finally *free*.

But here is where the story becomes most compelling to me. As Patrick enjoyed being home again, the Lord spoke to his heart during his times of prayer. And, one day, Patrick announced to his horrified friends that he was going *back* to Ireland...*back* to the people who had mistreated and enslaved him...in order to love them and to preach the Gospel to them.

He was ordained a bishop, so that he could go back to Ireland and build up the tiny Christian church there.

Once in Ireland, Patrick spent the rest of his days energetically preaching the Good News, caring for the poor, reconciling enemies, building up monasteries, spreading the message of Jesus. And he *may* have seen a snake or two... There is no record that he ever ate corned beef or green bagels...

Our culture focuses on one or two funny things about Patrick. But to me, THE most amazing thing about his life is this: he *escaped* slavery, but then chose to *go back* so that he could minister to the very people who had enslaved him.

They mistreated him – he treated them with the love of Christ. And eventually, Patrick changed the entire culture of Ireland. He changed Ireland because the love of God was so evident in his every action. He loved the Lord. He knew that the Lord love him.

And, almost every person who came into contact with Patrick – including his former slave masters – could not resist the power of God’s love in Patrick. Once God’s love gets unleashed in a person’s life, or in a culture, nothing can stop it. There is nothing more compelling than a person who is on fire with the Love of God.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is having a conversation with a Jewish leader named Nicodemus. And in that conversation, Nicodemus hears: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life.” Then we hear, “Whoever believes in God’s son will be saved. Whoever does not believe is already condemned.”

Are you listening? *God loves the world – the whole world.* And he sent his son – Jesus - into the world. Jesus is on fire with the love of God. He is the perfect revelation of God’s love! Jesus was vibrant, alive, full of the authentic joy that comes when God’s love is flowing through us. Nothing could stop that love – not even a crucifix. Jesus changed everything, by showing us what God’s love looks like.

But sadly ... some people resisted that gift, even though it was perfectly given. John’s Gospel

tells us that there are some people who look at the loving gift of God's salvation, and they decide to reject it. *God* doesn't condemn them – *they condemn themselves*, by walking away from the fullness of life that God's love makes possible.

Jesus changed everything – by being a perfect revelation of God's love in his culture. So many people saw the beauty of that gift, and could not resist it.

Saint Patrick changed Ireland – by being a very good revelation of God's love in his culture. So many people saw the beauty of that gift, and could not resist it.

Jesus, Patrick – people who allowed love to flow through them – changed their culture for the better.

But when you think of *our* culture today, what word comes to mind most quickly. “Love...” or *anger*?

I once heard a preacher say that anger is fear we don't know what to do with.

And fear is often rooted in the fact that we feel inadequate, vulnerable, unworthy. In other words, fear is often rooted in the fact that we do not believe that we are loved or loveable.

God so loved the world. Do you believe that really? Do you *trust* it, really?

Sometimes we meet people who are absolutely secure in the knowledge that God loves them wildly, passionately, completely. And people who trust that fact have a sense of freedom, joy, confidence, & peace about them.

But if I do not believe, know and trust that God loves me; if I do not open my heart to that gift; then there is vacuum in me. Something is missing. Something is lacking. *God* can fill it, but if I don't let God fill it, then I am driven, fearfully, to fill that gap in some other way.

So, if I do not experience God's overwhelming love for me, what happens?

I can become angry. Fearful. Protective of what little I have.

I start to use people. I take them for granted. I become mean, harsh, judgmental.

If I do not trust that *God* loves me, then I start to question whether *people* love me. So I become selfish and self-centered, or fearful of people who are different. I become antagonistic to people who seem to want or need something from me.

If I don't trust in God's rich mercy and overflowing love, then I become the stingy person. If I am fearful and angry, I look to a myriad of things to distract or comfort me. And none of those things are good for me.

And it goes without saying: if I have become that angry, fearful person, then the only thing I am spreading in my family, neighborhood or world, is anger and fear.

God so loved the world. God so loves *you*. That love is what your soul is hungry for. That love is the answer to your life's questions. That love is the peace that every part of you is yearning for. Accept it. Don't walk away, looking for answers and meaning in all the wrong places.

Love, Christ's love, transforms lives, and changes cultures, and saves the world.

Follow the example of Jesus, which is mirrored in the life of Saint Patrick. Listen to this Gospel, and believe it. God so *loves* the world that he sends *you* – his sons and daughters – into the world, not to condemn the world, but to show the world God's love and God's desire to save.

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