

When we think of St. Patrick, most of us think about the month of March, clover leaves, the color green, Savannah, parties, and maybe drinking way too much beer. But before there was a St. Paddy's Day, there was a man named St. Patrick. And the man named St. Patrick has a lot to teach us here today at Allison Creek.

Today is the second of our 6 part series on Spiritual practices to help us to follow God. Two weeks ago we focused on the practice of fellowship with other Christians. We then were invited to have a picnic with one another and play some kickball with one another. Many of us did that.

I shared in that sermon two weeks ago that what we were doing was so much more than just having fun with one another. What we were doing was engaging in a practice to help us to become better followers of God. Sharing fellowship with other Christians is one practice that helps us become better followers of God.

Today we are going to lift up a second practice that helps us to become better followers of God. Many would argue that this is the most important of the six practices. Today we lift up the spiritual practice of worship. "Why do we worship?" is maybe our first question. But I want to follow that question up with three questions that every church today should be asking themselves.

Does our worship help people experience God?

Does our worship open people to the presence of Christ?

Does our worship encourage people to become available to the Holy Spirit?

These questions bring us back to St. Patrick. During the fourth and fifth centuries, the Roman Church tried to evangelize the Celtic people to Christianity. But they failed miserably. In fact, the Roman Church had stopped sending missionaries to Ireland because most of the missionaries had been killed by the Celts. The Celts did not trust outsiders.

St. Patrick grew up in the Roman province of Brittannia in modern day Wales. Patrick was of Roman-Anglo descent. When Patrick was about 13 years old, he was captured by a Celtic raiding party that took him back to Ireland where he was made a slave. As a slave, he lived among the Celts for six years, tending sheep. Finally he escaped and returned to Brinannia. But he returned a changed man.

Celtic influences on his Romanized Christian faith helped him to see Christianity differently. He eventually became a priest and felt called to become a missionary to the Celtic people. The same Celtic people who had killed lots and lots of missionaries that had tried to go to Ireland before him. The pope wasn't real excited about sending Patrick to Ireland but he did.

Patrick ended up becoming a very successful missionary to the Celtic people. But he did not teach them a Roman Christianity. Instead, Patrick helped the Celts to create a vibrant, Celtic form of Christianity. For the Celtic people to become Christian then Christianity had to become authentic to the Celtic way of being.

Patrick's way of reaching out and connecting to the Celtic people was very different than the way evangelism was being done. The Roman Church believed that anyone who wasn't a Christian had to become Roman and then they could become Christian. The Roman Church believed that to become Christian meant to become like a Roman citizen first.

But the Celtic people were very different than the Roman people. The Celts were a people who were very passionate and emotional and they embraced conflict. When they entered battles, they went in naked, wearing nothing but sandals, a necklace, and a sword. Glad we don't have battle reenactments of Celtic wars today.

Celts had no interest in reading or writing and they saw Roman culture as a threat to their way of life. Therefore, missionaries trying to Romanize the Celts were usually beheaded or offered up to their gods in sacrifice.

But Patrick had a different approach. He started by asking a basic question: What is essential to Christian faith, teaching, and worship, and how can it be adapted to the Celtic people? By asking these questions he was able to help the people of Ireland form a Celtic Christianity.

So instead of teaching about the Trinity in the traditional way, he used a 3 leaf clover to teach about the Trinity. “Just as the shamrock is one plant with three leaves, God is one God in three persons.” Patrick taught that God had given the Celts the shamrock to teach them about the Christian God.

The Celtic people loved nature. The sun was very important to them. So rather than tell them that worshipping the sun was wrong, Patrick helped them to reinterpret their spirituality through Christian eyes. I hold in my hand a Celtic cross. You will notice that it is a cross with a circle. The circle represents the sun. So a Celtic cross is a combination of Celtic spirituality and Christian symbolism.

The Celts learned well from Patrick. The Celts then became the missionaries that reached out to people in Scotland, England and Germany. They went in to those new and unreached countries by becoming missionaries who learned and appreciated the culture before they introduced Christianity. These missionaries, like Patrick before them, helped these new Christians form religious expression that was authentic to who they were.

Here at Allison Creek we have an opportunity to evaluate the worship we offer and ask the three questions I raised earlier.

Does our worship help people experience God?

Does our worship open people to the presence of Christ?

Does our worship encourage people to become available to the Holy Spirit?

This is the time for us to ask these questions because we are in a time of transition. We have experienced the recent death of our music director, Gaither Bumgardner, and we have also just said “good-bye” to Steve Dobbins who has moved to Ohio. Steve has been instrumental in helping our worship become what it is today. So now is a time to reflect on worship and ask these types of questions.

So do we reflect on worship in a typical Presbyterian way and form a committee to study worship and make a recommendation to the Session? Maybe. But I am going to suggest a different way of reflecting on worship. A way which I think is authentic to Allison Creek.

The way that I encourage us to consider in reflecting on worship is to become even more a place of tremendous worship experimentation. A place where anyone is able to bring what excites them and share it in worship. Because deep down what we are all yearning for in worship is an experience of God. What we are all yearning for in worship is an encounter with God in Christ. What we are all yearning for is to sense that God’s Holy Spirit is connecting to us in some way.

For too many of us, worship has become a passive act. This may step on some toes but I am going to say it anyway. I think we as a congregation became too dependant on Gaither Bumgardner and Steve Dobbins to do worship for us. We did not have to provide much of ourselves because we could all depend on Gaither and Steve to do worship for us. And faithfully they did that every Sunday.

But the more dependant we became on them the less of ourselves we were willing to give to God in worship. In many ways we have become lazy in worship because we had some people who could carry the load. But that is not faithful worship. Faithful worship of God does not mean dumping responsibility for worship on other people and saying, “Go ahead. Inspire me.” That includes the musicians and that includes the pastor.

The other night I was with someone from this congregation and they laughed and asked me if they could take the strings off of a guitar and play an air guitar in worship. And my serious response to that question is “yes, you can.” There is nothing wrong with playing air guitar in worship. There is nothing wrong with playing air guitar in worship if the purpose is to bring you and others closer into the presence of God. If playing air guitar brings you and others into a closer encounter with God, then playing air guitar has a place in worship.

If playing air guitar is done to be funny or to draw attention to the person who is playing it, then we have misplaced our worship focus. If worship is done to bring adulation to the minister or to the choir or to someone who shares a prayer concern, then worship is wrong.

But if playing air guitar is done in order to direct attention to God and bring people closer to God’s presence, then there is a place for air guitar in worship.

During the Christian Education time today, the youth and adults will all have an opportunity to reflect on worship here. Share your input. Share yourselves. Your words will be recorded and together we can see how worship here can open ourselves up more to the presence of God.

If you are courageous enough to remain for another hour and share your thoughts, I encourage you to remember St. Patrick. The way he came to Christianity did not work for the people he felt called to reach out to. The way that worship has brought you to Christ may or may not be the way that others are brought into the presence of Christ. I encourage you to enter this conversation with an open mind and heart.

And take some risks and share yourself to help our worship. There are many ways to do this. For instance, this week one of you shared your electrical expertise to fix this microphone. By fixing this microphone, you have given of yourself to help worship become stronger here.

Maybe you have some video skills. Maybe you have some dance skills. Maybe you have some musical skills. Maybe you just have a story to share or a prayer concern to lift up. Maybe you want to share about a way you did ministry this week and maybe you need to bring to our attention something that we need to know about in the world.

Maybe you have the desire to bring a pressure washer by here one day and clean off the front of the sanctuary that has gotten dirty and maybe you are willing to paint the columns on the front that are peeling paint. All of these actions can help us come closer into the presence of God.

What is important is that worship comes out of who we are. We don't need to become like someone else. God has given us gifts that God is yearning for us to share in a way that is authentic.

I invite you to be a part of worship here. Even if it means bringing your air guitar.  
AMEN.

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-St. Patrick story from Standish, N. Graham, *In God's Presence: Encountering, Experiencing, and Embracing the Holy in Worship*, Alban, Herndon, VA., 2010

-Long, Thomas, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship*, Alban, Herndon, VA, 2001

-Texts: Psalm 100, Philippians 2:5-11

-Given: September 7, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)