

Chris Murphy
March 3, 2024
Scripture: Genesis 12: 1-3
Sermon Title: Reconnecting with the Journey

Prayer...

Introduction:

This morning we are exploring chapter 4 in the book *The Rebirthing of God* which focuses on Reconnecting with the Journey. Our Celtic Spirituality writer John Philip Newell continues our pilgrimage on the island of Iona by taking us to the part of the island called Saint Columba's Bay. You will notice a photo of the bay on your bulletin and on the screen. When my wife Karen and I visited the Saint Columba's Bay in 2006, I remember taking some photos with Karen and taking some time to reflect together on our lives and marriage. Here they are. (Show photos). It was a special time of reconnecting as a couple. I look back on our time that week as a special bonding time for us as we prepared for the next stage of our lives and our marriage.

In Newell's chapter on Reconnecting with the Journey he explains how Saint Columba came to the island of Iona in 563 AD.

Tradition says that Columba was an Irish prince with royal blood but also a monk who led his own monastic community. According to Newell, some legends suggest that Columba had to flee with his fellow monks to Iona because he was unwilling to bow before imperial Christianity that was forcing his group of monks to have a clerical tonsure that was Roman in style. Columba wanted to keep a tonsure that was Celtic in style, similar to the tonsure of the Druidic priests that were the spiritual leaders in Celtic lands before Christianity came to that area. Columba spoke of Christ as his druid, which was a way for Columba to help spread the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Celtic world. After Columba was on Iona, he helped lead a community of prayer that also would leave the island to spread the Gospel throughout Scotland. He led a missional community.

John Philip Newell takes us to Saint Columba's Bay to remind us of the missional movement of Celtic Christianity.

Newell also reminds us that the mission of sharing God's love is rooted in the story of Abraham within our Scriptures. We read today in Genesis 12: 1-3 the words God spoke to Abram, who later is known as Abraham.

12 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." [a]

Newell reminds us that the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are characterized by the practice of pilgrimage. Jews and Christians often go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Mount Sinai. Muslims often go on pilgrimage to

Mecca. Other Holy pilgrimage sites for Christians include Santiago de Compostella in Spain or the Journey to Iona, which we are exploring together.

When my wife and I went on pilgrimage in Scotland together in 2006, we were seeking greater wisdom and a deeper connection with God, creation, and specifically with one another.

It was a step of faith for us to go on pilgrimage, since we did not have a lot of resources at the time. We were fortunate that some friends and family gave us some donations to help us afford our pilgrimage. We were also willing to explore our faith in a new way as we traveled in Scotland and learned more about Celtic Christianity.

One of the ideas within Celtic Christianity and the teaching of John Philip Newell is that as we journey through our faith, we need to humbly learn from others. For Newell, this openness to God's work in the world includes learning from other faiths beyond Christianity.

Newell reflects on this value as he reflects on wisdom. Newell writes, “One of the primary features of the Rebirthing of God is reconnecting with wisdom, allowing the truth that has been etched into our being to come forth in new ways. This reconnecting will happen through a journey into the forgotten and unknown depths of our own souls and traditions. It will also include an outward journey into the neglected lands and undiscovered territories of other ways of seeing and other religious inheritances. The historic religions of the world are given not to compete with each other but to complete each other.”

I want to pause after sharing this quote and say the last line again. “The historic religions of the world are given not to compete with each other but to complete each other.”

How does that sound to you? If you are like me, you might have an initial feeling of that cannot be right. As many of you know, I grew up in a Presbyterian Church USA community that was proudly evangelical. We understood clearly that there is only one

true faith and that is Christianity. We believed that all other religions were false religions and so, if I am honest, we did not care that much about other religions unless we were engaging them to find a way to spread Christianity.

For the record, I still feel it is important to spread the good news of Christianity and the Gospel of Jesus. I became a pastor to lead a community in sharing the good news of Jesus.

What is different for me now is that I feel that as I share my Christian faith, I want to be open to learning from other faiths.

Friends, it may be new to us, but there is a type of Christian faith that exists that offers the good news of Jesus but not with a spirit of anger and judgement toward other faiths. Instead we offer the good news of Christ with a spirit of humility and an openness to learn from other faiths.

In this chapter on Reconnecting with the Journey, Newell tells a powerful story about his dad. Newell's dad worked for much of his life to help provide safe places for refugees in his home country of

Canada. Although Newell's dad had love for many refugees from other faith traditions, for most of his life he maintained a fairly conservative faith in terms of his religious beliefs, which meant that he hoped that the refugees who came from other faith traditions would become Christians. Nearing the end of his life, Newell's dad was visited by a Muslim couple named Sylvia and Boshe. Newell's dad had years earlier helped this couple escape from war-torn Bosnia. This couple referred to Newell's dad as father because he helped provide for them safety. Newell explains that at the end of his father's life when he was suffering with dementia, he became more humble and offered a powerful prayer for this couple.

Newell shares about his dad...

"He always loved to pray with the people visiting him. Somehow his words would flow when he prayed, even though in ordinary speech he would struggle to find the right words. One beautiful sunny afternoon when we were seated in the garden with Sylvia

and Boshe... I asked my father to pray. We were seated in a circle and joined hands. He began his prayer by saying, 'Without You, O God, we would not be. And because of You we are one family.' I looked across the circle and saw tears streaming down the faces of Boshe and Sylvia. They knew they were one family with us, but they had never heard my father say it. His religious ego had now collapsed. The barriers had broken down."

What I love about this story from Newell is that it invites us into the powerful idea that we are in one family with all humanity and really with all of creation. How powerful would it be for people to gather of different religious faith backgrounds, as well as those who are spiritual but non-religious, and those who do not identify with faith. How powerful would it be if we all gathered together and held hands as one family.

Newell reminds us of the teaching of Thomas Berry who speaks of the microphase and macrophase of any religious tradition. During the microphase of a religion, when it is young and its

particular gifts for the world are starting to form, the religious tradition needs to protect its uniqueness with well defined boundaries, similar to how a new tree sapling needs to be cared for in nature if it is to grow. In the microphase, the blessing of a religious tradition is for those that go within the self-defined boundaries. During the macrophase, as the religious tradition grows into a full tree, when it is well established, it can offer its blessing freely to the world.

Newell suggests that Christianity is in its macrophase. We are now in a time to grow into full maturity in our Christhood and make our offerings freely to the world. Not sharing the good news of Christ on the basis of whether people become Christian and enter our household of faith, but on the basis of the gifts we have to offer the world.

Newell says the gifts Christians potentially might offer the world include our practices of compassion for the poor, our understanding of the sacredness of the earth, and the nonviolent

teaching of Jesus. I might add that as a Christian, it is possible to share with other faith traditions that we Christians believe Jesus is the Savior of the world as long as we humbly acknowledge that it is possible that Jesus offers salvation to all people, including people of other faiths. If you remember in previous sermons, I have shared with you that notable Christian teachers like CS Lewis believed that people of many faiths will likely be in heaven one day. I also share this belief.

So the point of this chapter from Newell, is that we as Christians need to grow in maturity and share our faith in Christ in a way that is loving through actions of love and not in ways that are judgmental of other religion or non-religious beliefs. Rather than being judgmental of other faiths Christians with humility are to learn from people of other faiths and even be ready for God to speak through other faith perspectives to us.

One of the most powerful stories from this chapter on Reconnecting with the Journey is about Newell's interaction with a

Mohawk elder. In this story, Newell highlights the importance of being open to receive from other faith traditions. The story is so good that I want to again quote Newell directly. He shares,

“Many years ago I was delivering a talk in Ottawa, Ontario, on some of the main themes of the prologue of St. John’s Gospel, and especially the words “the Light that enlightens every person coming into the world (adapted from John 1.9). In attendance that evening was a Canadian Mohawk elder. He had been invited to be there to make observations about the parallels between his First Nations spirituality and the spirituality of the Celtic world. At the end of my talk he stood with tears in his eyes and said, ‘As I have been listening to these themes, I have been wondering where I would be tonight. I have been wondering where my people would be tonight. And I have been wondering where we would be as a Western world tonight if the mission that had come to us from Europe centuries ago had come expecting to find light in us.’

Such a powerful story. Newell acknowledges that we cannot undo the wrongs done to indigenous people of many nations in the past by Christians, but we can be part of a new beginning. As he says, “We can allow the true essence of our Christian heritage to be born anew.”

When my wife Karen and I went to Saint Columba’s Bay almost 20 years ago, we were invited to do a spiritual practice that pilgrims to Iona have done for years. We were invited to pick up two stones. With the first stone, we were invited throw it into the ocean as a way of letting go of something that prevents us from moving forward with our new beginning in life. The second stone we kept as a way of expressing the yearnings or desires we had for our lives. It represented a sign of new birth.

This week I tried to remember what the stones meant for me in 2006. I think I was letting go of some of my selfish behaviors that were harmful to me. I believe I was yearning for a deep connection to continue in my family and ministry.

As I reflect on the journey of Abraham in the book of Genesis and how he was called to go on pilgrimage and share his faith, I realize that we are all on that same journey. We like Columba years ago are invited to go on an outward journey of sharing our Christian faith with the world while being open to learn from other perspectives as well. Maybe Newell is right that the great spiritual traditions of the world are given not to compete with each other but to complete each other. Maybe, the figurative stone Christians need to throw into the bay is the stone of superiority. We can believe that Christ is our Lord and Savior, but we do not need to teach that Christians are superior to people of other faiths. Maybe the figurative stone we should keep is the stone of the true essence of Jesus, who humbly showed the love of God and demonstrated compassion to the vulnerable not in order to force people to follow him, but instead to be faithful to God's heart for the world.

Some of you know that my wife Karen is an ecumenist, which means she has studied the value of different Christian traditions coming together to learn from one another. She has also studied how the Catholic Church and other denominations like Presbyterian are involved in inter-faith dialogue and mission partnerships. Karen and I once went together to the Muslim Education Trust in Tigard and heard a presentation about the values being taught by this Muslim school. We were amazed at the similar struggles and hopes within the Muslim community and the Christian community.

I hope one day our church might be able to host spiritual conversations with people of many faiths as a way to foster peace and unity. We will be able to share our Christian faith with great love, while learning from our sisters and brothers of other faith traditions. I wonder if this is what reconnecting with the journey and our own growth in wisdom might look like for our Christian community.

Please pray with me...

Jesus, we love you and we sense that your heart is more open that we might have thought at different times. Help us share our faith with kindness and compassion and help us be open to receive from your wisdom in other faiths and perspectives. We pray for unity in the church and we pray for unity among people of all faiths, people who are spiritual but not religious, and people who do not identify with a particular. Help us love one another and to walk in peace on the this spiritual journey through life. AMEN.

Genesis 12:1-3

The Call of Abram

12 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”[a]