



St. Luke's East Hampton Reflections from Fr. Ben

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About 25 years ago, I visited St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland. Just outside the cathedral is "St. Patrick's well," a place where St. Patrick was said to have baptized thousands of people. Whether or not those numbers are true, the fact remains that St. Patrick was wildly successful at bringing Christianity to Ireland. His actions show how we might be successful in doing the same thing today.

Legend says that as a boy Patrick was kidnapped by pirates and taken to Ireland where he worked herding sheep. He escaped from Ireland, went back to England and became a priest, later returning to the Emerald Isle as a missionary. He didn't do what Christian missionaries often did and tell the people they were wrong. Instead, he told them they were right, that they were experiencing something holy in their holy places, that they were finding God in nature, in community, in story and in song. Like Paul at the Areopagus, he simply told them that their God had a name. Using the shamrock as an example, Patrick showed them that it was possible to experience the one God in different ways. Foreshadowing the "via media" and comprehensiveness of Anglicanism, his faith was both/and instead of either/or. Patrick's message was that the hierarchical, linear, masculine religion of Rome could co-exist with (and be improved by) the communal, circular, feminine religion of the Celtic people. For Patrick, the world was full of "thin places" where people could experience the holiness of God. For Patrick, everything pointed to Christ.

Many people are afraid of going to church because they think Christians will judge them, tell them that the spirituality they are experiencing in nature, in relationship with others, and in other traditions is somehow wrong. Imagine what would happen if we followed Patrick's example and told them that they were right, that they were experiencing the holy, were experiencing God, and were welcomed and accepted just as they were? Imagine what would happen if, like St. Patrick, we told them that God had a name and that their paths were leading them to Jesus.

It has been said that the Irish saved civilization. Perhaps if we followed their example, we could do the same thing... and save the church as well.