

Bless to Me, Part 6: Blessings That Endure
By Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes
Countryside Community Church
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Scriptures: Isaiah 41:27-31; 2 Corinthians 4:8-10
Poetry: "We Saw A Vision" by Liam Mac Uistgín

I. Faith

Having just returned from Countryside's "Ireland Retreat," my inner cup is not only full, but overflowing. So I hope you don't mind if some of my experiences overflow into the reflection this morning. Perhaps we'll all experience a mini "Ireland Retreat" together!

I am cognizant that as we sit here this morning, however, that tens of thousands have been displaced and 50 have died from flooding in Houston, Texas, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced and over 1,200 people have died from flooding in Mumbai, India. All this has caused me to interpret my Ireland experiences through the lens of the flooding, and the flooding through the lens of the Irish.

The two very different themes actually share something profoundly in common. It has been said that the heart of Irish poetry – which is the heart of the Irish psyche – is captured by a single, recurring theme: "That which is left standing when all else has been stripped away." Certainly, the flood victims in Houston and Mumbai are currently learning for themselves what is left standing. Perhaps, even, they are coming up with some of the same answers that the Irish have come up with over the centuries.

I think, for instance, of Ireland's patron saint, St. Patrick. As buoyant, generous-spirited, and grateful for life's many blessings as Patrick was known to be, he was quite familiar with catastrophic loss, starting at the age of 16. At 16, Patrick was living happily in his native land of Great Britain somewhere on its western shores. One day, however, it's like the rug was pulled out from under Patrick's life. Pirates came while he was out wandering away from his home. They captured Patrick and took him across the sea to Ireland. There he was sold as a slave and forced to look after a local chieftain's sheep. Wearing hardly a speck of clothing, Patrick became quite familiar with the particular kind of despair that sets in when, on top

of losing your family, your friends, your faith community, your country, and your dignity, you are half frozen and wet most every day.

Amazingly, however, Patrick would later look back on his experience and count it as a blessing, not a curse. Why? Because when he thought all was lost, he discovered something he never knew he had – and this “something” opened up the world for him.

If you want to experience a hint or suggestion of what Patrick discovered, I invite you to take a few moments to pause and call to mind one of the many youths who have experienced catastrophic loss in the recent flooding in Houston or Mumbai. In Mumbai, no small number have, like Patrick, lost their families as well as their possessions and any kind of certainty about the future. Whomever you hold in your mind, real or imagined, keep holding this youth there until you can feel empathy for this person ... until this youth’s pain sinks far enough inside you to become your pain ... until you want to reach out and wrap your loving arms around this youth as if he or she is your own ... until you wish you could do something – anything – to take away this youth’s pain and provide lasting comfort if you could.

Can you feel these things? Then you probably understand something of what Patrick experienced. No, he wasn’t feeling these feelings toward another person. He was feeling these things coming from God. Like God was experiencing his pain and loneliness, like God was wanting to wrap God’s loving arms around him ... like God had determined to do whatever God could do to take away Patrick’s pain and provide lasting comfort. He experienced these things not as wishful thinking, but as bedrock Reality.

Up to this point, Patrick had never really taken the existence of God as anything but an intellectual possibility. Though his father was a deacon in his church, and his grandfather a priest, Patrick tells us in his *Confessions* that he’d never really taken his faith seriously. Imagine a sixteen-year-old not relating to the faith of us parents ...!

Yet with his newfound assurance that God not only was aware of his predicament and empathized with it, but was also willing and able to do something meaningful about it, Patrick fell in love with a God who loved him beyond his ability to understand or account for. Trusting that God would eventually find a way to freedom for him, Patrick became content, until then, to receive and give thanks for God’s blessings in smaller things – those many things that you and I

experience everyday but take for granted. Things like enough food to keep you alive for one more day; like the ability to breathe in sustaining air. Things like the intense beauty of his surroundings – its flora and fauna, its mountain vistas, its sheep and lambs that were under his care. Through falling in love with God, Patrick fell in love with God's world, which brought new blessings his way each and every day even as the human beings in his life continued to keep him in bondage.

Eventually, Patrick did make it back home to his homeland and his family, thanks to a vision in a dream Patrick believed to be from God that prompted him to escape and walk 200 miles to the sea where he just happened to find a ship about to leave for his homeland – which is what his dream told him he'd find.

Back home and full of gratitude to God, Patrick attended seminary and became a priest. From this point on, Patrick could have disappeared into history, serving like many priests in towns and churches that are now nameless and lost to us. But he had another dream several years into his priesthood. It was of a man bearing letters from the Irish asking him to come and share with them the same faith he had found when all else had been stripped away – and when he had not been a person of faith himself.

Patrick's faith was a perfect faith for a people who were used to loss, and who, until Patrick, had been considered too barbaric and backwards by other church folk to evangelize. So Patrick went back to the very people who had enslaved him with no malice or need for revenge. Just a message about a God who is there for us when all is lost; who knows all our pain; who loves both the faithful and the faithless enough to seek relationship with all who are willing to receive it; and who calls each of us to become part of God's blessing the world.

II. Community

After the Ireland Retreat had finished, I remained in Ireland for a couple more days to visit some ancient Celtic sites with my childhood friend, Erik Still, and his wife, Jules. One of the places we visited was a 6th Century monastery of Clonmacnoise. Clonmacnoise lies entirely in ruins now. Frankly, Clonmacnoise isn't anywhere close to the most beautiful place we visited during or after the retreat, but its story hit me like a pile of bricks. Like many Celtic Christian monasteries, Clonmacnoise attracted people from far and wide, eventually coming in such numbers to learn from the monks and study there that the area turned into a large and vibrant community. What started as a community of

fewer than ten people grew to approximately 1,500 to 2,000.

What makes this surprising is that, between the 8th and 12th Centuries, Clonmacnoise was attacked, and at times burned or otherwise destroyed, at least 80 times! At least 40 of these attacks were by the English; at least 27 more were by the Irish themselves. The Vikings were responsible for at least another 7 attacks, and the Normans for at least 6. That's one major attack – or destruction – every 5 years for 400 years! Talk about a town that knows – really, deeply knows – what it is like to have everything stripped away! Yet, during this same time period, Clonmacnoise actually experienced the greatest *growth* in its history and produced some of the most beautiful artworks in metal and stone ever seen in Ireland.

What was responsible for the tenacity of the Clonmacnoise citizenry? Well, when a hurricane hits the same area repeatedly, we see a similar phenomenon. Some people move away, knowing that harm will come that way again, but many people stay. Why do they stay? Apparently for those of Clonmacnoise, what they found each time that their security – and even their entire town – was stripped away was that something remained with them. Surely, like Patrick, many found that faith remained when all else seemed lost, but faith alone would not explain why they didn't take themselves (and their faith) out of harm's way. No, the citizens of Clonmacnoise discovered that one other thing remained besides their love of God. It was their love of their neighbor.

The late Rev. Dr. William Sloane-Coffin once observed that it would be better not to live than not to love. Surely, it was love – love that transcended family bonds and extended to their neighbors, and their neighbor's neighbors – that held the community of Clonmacnoise so tightly that they would rather lose everything they had than give up the relationships they knew would endure.

III. Hope

One of the most memorable places we visited on the Ireland Retreat was actually the most ordinary. In fact, it was memorable precisely because it was so ordinary. It was an ordinary church parlor in which an extraordinary thing took place.

Some of you know that one of the reasons we were in Ireland was to study the Peace and Reconciliation efforts that have taken place in Ireland since conflict between Protestants and Catholics spilled over into violence and bloodshed in the late 1960s that lasted until the late 1990s. This period of conflict is commonly

referred to as “The Troubles”. Our group met with poets, musicians, and activists who had all been directly affected by The Troubles – one of whom had, at age two, witnessed her father being murdered before her eyes.

In the late 1990s, however, a handful of leaders on both sides did what many considered unthinkable. They held a secret meeting in the very ordinary parlor our group visited in the Clonard Monastery Cathedral in Belfast in order to see if an end could be made to the bloodshed.

Surely, each person at this meeting would have had every reason to jump across the table and grab the throat of someone on the other side. These folks met at great personal risk. Many of their own constituencies would have felt like their meeting betrayed everything they had fought for, and the memory of their loved ones whose deaths had not been avenged. They would have done anything in their power to prevent such a meeting taking place.

So why did they do it? Because they were Irish! When The Troubles stripped from them everything they held dear – including the hope of their generation ever truly reconciling with each other, or sharing a common faith, or even a common neighborhood to live in together – they found one thing was left that each held in common: a future. Not *their* future so much as their children’s future. If the sides they represented could not, or would not, set aside their differences, then the one thing they could do was devote themselves to a future in which their children could.

St. Patrick found *faith* when all else was stripped away. The citizens of Clonmacnoise found faith and *community* endured when they had lost everything else. Those who met in Parlor 4 of the Clonard Monastery Cathedral found that when all sense of common faith or community was lost between the two sides, *hope* remained.

They built on it. And hope endured.

It was this meeting, and that hope, that led directly to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, putting an end to 30 years of violence and bloodshed. While work still remains to heal the tensions between Protestant and Catholic in Ireland, that work takes place almost entirely without the threat of violence setting them back.

Faith, Loving Community, and Hope. Centuries of life experience and loss in Ireland confirm that these three are blessings that endure – just as the apostle

Paul had said they would centuries before even Patrick: "And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love." Love which rebuilt Clonmacnoise 80 times!

In our day, despite the struggles we are living with in our country – be they catastrophic flooding or catastrophic political polarization – I dare say that neither faith, nor loving community, nor hope have been entirely stripped away. In fact, you can still find quite a lot of each wherever you travel in America. In other words, we still have plenty of the most valuable resources you can have when trying to recover from great losses. The only question is, will we make adequate use of them before these blessings are *all* that remain to us?

"We Saw A Vision" – by Liam Mac Uistgín

*In the darkness of despair we saw a vision.
We lit a light of hope
And it was not extinguished.
In the desert of discouragement we saw a vision
We planted a tree of valour
And it blossomed.*

*In the winter of bondage we saw a vision.
We melted the snow of lethargy
And the river of resurrection flowed from it.*

*We sent our vision aswim like a swan in the river
The vision became a reality
Winter became summer
Bondage became freedom
And this we left to you as our inheritance*

O generations of freedom remember us, the generations of the vision.