

St. Aidan Lived the Gospel

Matt 16 21-28

St. Aidan's Episcopal Church

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Today we celebrate our patron saint, Aidan of Lindisfarne. Now as part of my sabbatical I took two days and traveled up to the Holy Island as it is called. Just off the coast in Northeastern England, almost to the border with Scotland this foothold for the re-establishment of Christianity in England is still a place of importance especially to the people of this area. When we were there multiple school groups were visiting on field trips. It reminded me of the obligatory trips to Williamsburg or Washington DC that students around here experience.

Even though it was June it was a blustery cold and for the first day very rainy visit. I had on every bit of warm clothing I had brought. We saw the ruins of the church and the cloister, but Cuthbert who is almost more celebrated by the locals than Aidan built these. It was Cuthbert that built the great monastery. Aidan was the first one, well the second person sent to Northumbria to bring Christianity back after a long pagan influence. Aidan came from Iona and established his small monastery on this island that is only accessible at low tide when the causeway is above water. He selected this place in part because it is much like Iona from where he came.

So why did King Oswald select a monk from Iona to come back to Northumbria? Oswald became king in 633 but prior to that he had been in exile on the Isle of Iona. So rather than go to Canterbury he asked for a monk from the Iona monastery. A priest from Canterbury had tried working out of York but declared the people to primitive to be Christianized and left.

Aidan built simple wooden dwellings including a small church to establish this foothold. I must admit it was a thrill to stand in the current church and know that the altar where he stood would have been right where I was standing. By the way if you want lots of attention on the Holy Island just mention that you are the vicar (did use the English term) at a St. Aidan's in the states.

From there his mission expanded quickly and very effectively. This simple start does fit for Aidan while a wonderful evangelist he lived a very simple life. He established not just churches, but monastic communities that became the center of village life in an area that really did not have much in the way of cities in which to build large churches. Aidan however doesn't strike me as a large church type of person.

Today's gospel is not the one that is used for his official day on August 31 but it is the gospel assigned for this Sunday. Since this is not a major feast day I am

supposed to use the gospel assigned and that is fine for Aidan understood this gospel and in many respects lived this gospel.

The portion I am looking at in particular is Jesus' statement to Peter after he rebukes him and calls him Satan (which by the way means accuser or adversary not necessarily the devil as we know him). "...you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Take a moment to examine those words. I was walking one morning this week and listening to a playlist on my iPhone and all of a sudden my phone switched to a different play list and I was hearing the voice of Richard Rohr. Somewhat puzzled I stopped pulled the phone out of my pocket and realized that somehow my phone had decided I needed to hear a lecture about St. Francis. Ok I'm not sure God reached down and switched my play list, but what Richard had to say about St Francis also fits what we know about Aidan. In fact I would say that Aidan was a Franciscan before there were Franciscans after listening to the lecture. That lecture will be the topic of the first couple of Wednesday Night Bible studies starting September 13 at 6:30 in the library.

"You are setting your mind on earthly things not on heavenly things." Thomas Merton was the first to write about the false self and the true self and a great deal of Richard Rohr's work is on this. The false self is the self-centered on our ego and while necessary, limits us if we do not move beyond it at some point in time. The vestry starts every meeting with a meditation and we looked at this. One person commented, "I really identify with Peter. He loved Jesus and didn't want to lose him." I'm sure that is exactly what Peter was thinking and would be what most of us would think if put in the same situation. Jesus however says that we are then stuck in what we want and need. This is the false self, controlling the situation and the disciples were stuck in that place for most of the gospel. I believe this is why Jesus was so frustrated with them much of the time! Most of us spend a lot of our life stuck in the same place as well.

Thomas Merton tells us that the true self is a God centered self. When we are functioning out of our true self, then our ego is strong enough that we can set our ego needs aside and look to a greater good and need. These are the heavenly things to which Jesus is referring. This is also where we come back to Aidan.

Aidan understood the true self even before anybody had talked about it. Just as Peter knew who Jesus was without any formal doctrine, Aidan understood the need to focus on heavenly things. Aidan walked everywhere. When given a beautiful horse, he gave it to a peasant who needed it. He walked because that is how he encountered people. It is interesting to note that as I listened to Richard's talk about Francis, that Franciscans to this day are not allowed owning or riding a horse. This put them above the average person.

Aidan understood that the true self, the God centered self set aside the worldly things and picked up that cross that requires us to accept all, to love all, even our enemies. It is totally counter cultural. Our world glories in success in worldly possessions. In fact the more you have the better seems to be our goal. It's like the bumper sticker I saw once on a sports car that said, "He who dies with the most toys wins." I prefer the one on an old Honda that said, "He who dies with the most toys is still dead." Matthew more than any other gospel preaches this over and over again.

Aidan understood. Aidan accepted all, saint as well as sinner. In fact like Jesus he seemed to prefer the poor, the needy the sinner. I think a quote from Richard Rohr this week says it well:

The True Self is always humble. It knows that we didn't do it right and that it isn't even about doing it right; it's just about doing it. Our True Self knows that everything belongs. That means holding together the good and the bad, the dark and the light, the sinner and the saint—which are two parts of me and two parts of everything. It is our participation in divinity, which allows us to be this large.¹

It is said that a parish takes on the personality of its patron saint. Well we have quite an example and a tough act to follow with Aidan. However the collect I read at the start of the service does describe Aidan and how we are called to respond to his example. Let us pray that together again.

Collect for St. Aidan from the Book of Lesser Feasts and Fasts (now known as Holy Men, Holy Women) O loving God, who called your servant Aidan from the peace of a cloister to re-establish the Christian mission in northern England, and gave him the gifts of gentleness, simplicity, and strength: Grant that we, following his example, may use what you have given us for the relief of human need, and may persevere in commending the saving Gospel of our Redeemer Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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