This summer one of our worship themes will be Celtic Christianity—that of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and other areas of Celtic influence. Some aspects of “Celtic Christianity” include Celtic crosses, love of creation, strong Trinitarian focus, and so forth. We are setting this Celtic identity beside the first Celtic Christian faith: the faith of the churches in Galatia, part of the ancient Roman Empire. The converts who responded to the Apostle Paul in the region known as Galatia were predominantly Celts. In the centuries before Christ, Celtic tribes settled in this area, not just northern Europe. Celtic Christianity, in some sense, did not start in northern Europe but in central Asia Minor or Turkey. So our Scripture for the morning is from Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia and we hear details not only about the gospel proclaimed but also some autobiographical details of Paul’s life.

Galatians 1:11-24: 11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; 12 for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. 15 But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. 18 Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; 19 but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. 20 In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! 21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, 22 and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; 23 they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” 24 And they glorified God because of me.

If you dabble into Celtic Christianity, you will quickly come upon stories of Patrick—or “St. Patrick”—the one for whom we wear green and become “Irish for a day” on March 17. Stories abound about Patrick and they have to be read as what they are—legends to entertain and folk tales to teach. However, we have two writings of Patrick—a letter he wrote to British pirate king and “The Confessio” or “The Confession”—a defense of his ministry in Ireland. In the latter, we learn some real, biographical details.

Several things to note: (1) Patrick himself was not Irish—he was British. He was born in the area we call England. (2) Initially, he was only a nominal Christian—in name only. And (3), he came from a wealthy home, with prospects for the best education of the day. However, when he was sixteen years old, he was kidnapped by Irish raiders and taken across the sea to Ireland. He was a slave in Ireland for six years. In the process he learned Irish—Gaelic, as we would know it today. And in the crisis of slavery, his nominal faith blossomed and grew—the crisis seemed to be the catalyst to his faith. After six years, he escaped. Following an arduous journey by sea and then by foot, he made his way back to his home, to his parents. He was “home, sweet home.” However, in his Confession, he tells of the urging to go back to Ireland—the Holy Spirit urging. His family was
completely against it—he was finally safe from the rough and rugged tribal world of Ireland, how could he think of going back?

Patrick sensed the call to go Ireland—the outer limits of the world, beyond civilization. There were some churches in Ireland already…but few in number and only among those educated in the ways of the West, of the Latin world of the early Roman Catholic Church. But Patrick had paid the “tuition” for an “Irish language school”—his enslavement for six years. Patrick had learned the culture of the pagan Celtic world beyond civilization. And through him, the Christian faith flourished in Ireland. Legends say Patrick converted all of Ireland—overstated, but it is clear that he shaped the faith of the entire island for centuries to come. He shaped what has become Celtic Christianity.

Patrick…and then the apostle Paul. The apostle Paul is responsible for the faith of the Celts in Galatia (what is now central Turkey). Like Patrick, Paul was a foreigner, not Celtic but rather Jewish. Unlike Patrick, Paul was not even a nominal Christian in his youth—Paul was actually a persecutor of the church. He tried to stamp out the budding Christian community, what he considered to be an aberration to the Jewish faith. And yet, in the providence of God, it is Paul who brings the gospel to the Celts of Galatia. And not simply to the Celts of Galatia, Paul took the gospel to Cretans, Greeks, Romans—the great ethnic variety of the Roman Empire. A large portion of our New Testament is devoted to Paul’s missionary journeys and his letters. Paul shaped all of Christian expression since the first century.

Patrick and Paul: here is what can be said of both. They both saw in their story irony and grace. Neither one of them saw much in their story that was of their own achievement and accomplishment. Indeed, Paul will declare a little later in Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:19b-20) Not I, but the Christ that lives in me.

Irony…Patrick repeatedly notes in his Confession that he was not well educated, that he was ignorant, that he did not have a strong faith as child and youth. Indeed, he mentions but does not name some particularly shameful act of his youth that came back to haunt him 30 years later. Patrick concludes his Confession with this description of himself:

But I beg those who believe in God and fear him whoever shall condescend to peruse or to receive this writing which Patrick, a very badly educated sinner, has written in Ireland, that nobody shall ever say that it was I, the ignoramus, if I have achieved or shown any small success according to God’s pleasure, but you are to think and it must be sincerely believed, that it was the gift of God. And this is my Confession before I die.

—St. Patrick, Confession, Section 62

He says: Not I, the ignoramus, but all achievement is the “gift of God.” In other words, like Paul, not I, but the Christ who lives in me!

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Irony…Paul noted he was a persecutor of the church, an enemy to the Christian way. And yet he becomes the great missionary of the Christian way. Even his visit to Galatia has an ironic twist. Later in this letter to the churches in Galatia, he notes: “You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 4:13-14). Illness was the cause for him being with them—Paul’s presence in Galatia was matter of being ill…not of being strong and powerful.

Irony…Patrick’s slavery was an onerous experience—taken from his home, put in the fields to work and yet it was the doorway to mission. This experience gave him a heart for those who had experienced slavery—whether economic or spiritual. And Patrick’s lack of education made him a rustic, a simple person…he even call himself an “ignoramus” in his Confession. And yet he was ideal to communicate the gospel to an uncivilized, illiterate world. Whether he actually explained the doctrine of the Trinity (one God in three expressions) by picking up a shamrock and showing how the three leaves are separate but still one shamrock may be debatable historically. However, the story is in character with historical Patrick—who knew himself to be simple and rustic.

Both Patrick and Paul point to the irony of God’s purpose. Both went through great travail and great personal sufferings. I could understand either one of them taking some credit for their perseverance, for their success, for their work. However, each consistently and regularly sees their strength in the gift of God, not in themselves. Indeed, they saw their identity in God.

In today’s world, much is said about “identity theft.” That is, persons with nefarious purposes will take your personal information and then benefit financially by acting as if they were you. Recently I ran across a sort of Rodney Dangerfield rift on this phenomenon of “identity theft” (Dangerfield, a comedian, did a routine that ended with the tag line: “I don’t get no respect”): “My friends and advisors told me not to worry about identity theft—no one would want to be me. I don’t get no respect.”

Here’s what distinguishes Paul and Patrick: they recognized that the greatest identity theft of all is when our identity is set by anyone other than God. So others may say: “You’re a loser…you’re a weakling…you’re a nothing.” Or, often the identity theft is more self-inflicted: my identity is set by anger—we do not just grumble, we become our grumble. Our identity may be set by our drivenness or our lack of drivenness. What Paul and Patrick affirm is the irony of God to use fallible, broken, tainted vessels like them—and God’s purpose gives them identity.

Identity…Patrick, Paul, and us. The greatest identity theft of all is to lose the identity that God gives us. One of my favorite preachers, a minister by the name of Fred Craddock, told a marvelous story about identity. He told of vacationing in the Smokey Mountains of East Tennessee. While eating in a mountain inn, an old man struck up a conversation with him. When the old man found out that Craddock was a preacher, he said to him, “I got a story about a preacher.” And this is what he said:

I was born back here in these mountains. My mother was not married and she had me as a child. The children at the school had a name for me—me not having a daddy—and it hurt when they called me that word, that word for a child without a father. During recess, I would hide in the shrubs and weeds until the bell rang. I ate lunch by myself. When I went to town with my mother, people would stare at her and then me, trying to figure out who was my father.
A painful time... about the seventh or eighth grade, I started to go hear a preacher. He frightened me in a way and attracted me in another way. He had face that looked like it had been dug out of rock. He thundered when he spoke. Even though I went to worship, I was afraid people would say, “What’s a boy like you doing in church?” So I went in time for the sermon and rushed out afterwards before anyone would have a chance to speak to me.

One Sunday, however, some women got to talking in the aisle and I couldn’t get by them to the door. I began to sweat and get cold, wondering “Oh, oh, somebody’s going to speak to me and say: ‘What’s a boy like you doing in church?’” I felt a hand on my shoulder and out of the corner of my eye, I saw that face—the minister. The minister looked directly at me and stared at me. I knew he was going to guess who I was.

He said to me, “Well, son, you’re a child of... you’re a child of.... Ah, wait—you’re a child of God. I see a strikin’ resemblance in your face.” With a swat to my bottom, the preacher said to me: “Go out and claim your inheritance.”

“You’re a child of God. Go out and claim your inheritance.” When Fred Craddock heard this story, he asked the old man, who was talking, what his name was. The old man said, “Ben Hooper.” Ben Hooper? Ben Hooper! Fred Craddock remembered his own father speaking of how the people of Tennessee had elected two times a governor named Ben Hooper, a man who didn’t have a daddy, who was called “illegitimate” if not worse. A child of God who went out to claim his inheritance!

Paul, Patrick, and us... the only identity that counts comes from God. Let’s go out and live into our inheritance.

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2 Multiple versions of this story can be found on the Internet but it can be found in close to this form in Fred Craddock’s Craddock Stories (Chalice Press, 2001), pages 156-157.