

Proper 11C: 7/21/19  
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[Reconstructed from notes upon request]

I'm so thankful for the week just spent in the "School of Celtic Consciousness" at Mercy Center in Madison CT. It was led by the great Celtic poet, theologian and author John Philip Newell, perhaps best known from his time as spiritual leader of the Iona Community on that holy isle off the west coast of Scotland. You might say that I sat at his feet, like Mary before Jesus in today's gospel.

I paid good money for that privilege. In fact, *you* paid good money for it as part of the continuing education line in our parish budget. This also covered the necessity of regular meals to keep me from getting "hangry" so I could pay attention and learn.

It took a small army of "Martha's" to make it possible for me and the other couple hundred participants to be "Mary's". No matter how brilliant, witty or incisive the lectures (and they were!), how could we truly benefit from them without the Martha's who fed us and cleaned up after us. The Martha's who adjusted the air conditioning as the heat wave wore on. The Martha's who processed our registrations even before we got there.

Looking over the staff list on the Mercy Center website as I did last night, you'll see that most everyone from the custodial to housekeeping staff to the executive director are there not because they couldn't make more money elsewhere, but because they want to support the vision of what goes on there.

Mary vs. Martha: It's a false choice. We need both. We need to *be* both. We need to integrate our thoughts/visions/values/faith with our actions – how we live and how we speak, how we treat one another, and how we vote. This is what is called integrity – when our inner life is *integrated* into our actions in the world.

JP Newell told the wonderful story of meeting the man who would become his spiritual and theological mentor – George MacLeod, founder of the modern day

Iona Community. MacLeod had begun life as an aristocrat and WWI hero, but after his conversion to following Christ ended up serving the “least of these” (as Jesus says in Matthew 25) and espousing non-violence. Newell calls him “an aggressive pacifist.”

Newell first met the great Celtic prophet George MacLeod while visiting Iona as a 21-year-old theological student from the University of Edinburgh. Perhaps recognizing the promise in the young student, MacLeod issued an invitation: “Newell, come back for a whiskey!” JP Newell had never had “a whiskey” before but he did go sit at the feet of the great master, MacLeod.

MacLeod spoke of the urgency of recovering the riches of the ancient Celtic tradition. Of the need to sustain the holy isle of Iona as an international center of Christian pilgrimage and healing. He raised up the Celtic notion of the feminine aspect of the Divine. He emphasized not original sin but original blessing – that we are made in God’s image and the task of this life is to recover and release that which has been distorted in ourselves and others.

MacLeod spoke to Newell of the cross, of atonement – what he called *at-one-ment*, reconciliation with God in Christ. For MacLeod the cross was not to “pay for our sins” but to reveal the depths of what God is willing to do for love. And he spoke of the sacredness of all creation, of God *in* creation. He repeated his great mantra: “Matter matters.”

Huge, head-spinning concepts. Thrilling ideas. Which MacLeod concluded by asking, “*So, Newell, what are we going to do about it?*”

George MacLeod was a man of prayer, but he didn’t end by saying let’s offer “thoughts and prayers.” He was a renowned preacher whose sermons were broadcast on BBC, but he didn’t ask, “What are we going to say about it?” And he was a great teacher, but he didn’t ask, “What do you think about this?”

He asked a most Martha-esque question: “Newell, what are we going to DO about it?” Which of course I couldn’t help but hear as, “Dodd, what were we going to do about it?”

We live in different times from those of George MacLeod who raised funds to restore Iona Abbey during the lean years of the 1930s and preached peace during the war in the 1940s.

We come here today after a week in which our country has once again been roiled by racist strife and division.

*What are we going to do about it?*

With migrant children separated from their families, some without basic hygiene, in detention camps on our southern border.

*What are we going to do about it?*

And with the brokenness and heart-ache of our own lives and families.

*What are we going to do about it?*

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