

The Service of The Burial of the Dead for the Rev. Irene Clifford Jones

OT: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

NT: 1 John 4:7-8, 11-13, 17-19

Gospel: John 14:1-6

And Jesus said, "I am the Way."

Allow me to begin with this Celtic prayer:

God to enfold us,  
God to surround us,  
God in our speaking,  
God in our thinking.

Lately Irene and I have been talking about the Celts, their remarkable ways and particularly their remarkable way of being Christian. She was engaged by the liveliness of the Celts and their fully embodied living as followers of the Way.

This is not a surprise to any of us gathered here to celebrate her life. She was as one of her friends wrote on her Facebook page Thanksgiving morning, an "exceptional combination of razor-sharp intellect and fully-open empathy." Her love of God, life, her family, her friends and those whose privilege it is to have known her as priest are all further expressions of her being a person fully alive.

She lived in the way that Howard Thurman invites when he said, "Ask not what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive... then go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive"

Irenaeus said it even longer ago: "The glory of God is a person fully alive"

In the truest sense Irene's life was a series of steps toward becoming more fully alive.

Irene's appreciation of the Celts grew as her sense of her own vocation and ministry grew. Less and less was she a patient participant in everyday life, the Church, her relationships, in formal, distant or even particularly orderly ways.

More and more, she engaged fully, passionately, even at times assertively as she, even in her most dire times of diminished health, gave herself to living the fully embodied life of one of God's own.

Even as she suffered with and through various challenges, Irene lived as one who thought we know God too little because we live life too timidly. As one who had been given much she saw that all that one had to give in return was one's life, fully lived. Whether it was in the small way of giving her time to others in conversation or in the big ways of moving beyond what is comfortable to what is faithful and true to giving fully and without weighing the cost, she saw this extending, this stretching, this emergence as the primary way of being in this world and the next.

It is easy to see why she would find the Celts so engaging. The Celts offer a Christian way that avoided the “angels dancing on the head of a pin” arguments and instead focuses on fully engaging in the Dance!

And although her form of the dance was not that of the Lord of the Dance it was certainly that of The Lord. Think of her laughter. Think of her lively engagement in conversation. Think about that certain look in her eyes. Think of her way of loving. No one can argue that she was not a follower of the Way. No one can argue that she was not fully engaged in the dance!

It is easy to hear Jesus in his conversation with Thomas through the ears of the Celts. Thomas is the doubter. He does what we all do. He sets in place his requirements. He makes his plans for how things have to be if he is to believe. To the real possibility of a real encounter with God, he places conditions. He demands verifiability. He will believe when Jesus’ resurrection can be made empirically true. To this earlier encounter with Jesus he brings panic and anxiety. “How can we know the way?” he pleads.

Jesus, answers with one of his many “I am” phrases. He answers as the One who is incarnate God, he answers as the One most fully alive. “I am the Way,” he answers. And as we can see in scripture and with all of the Saints, following that way means being fully loving, fully alive!

Still, for us, Thomas’ question remains: How can **we** know the way? **How** can we know the way? How can we know **the way**?

Irene as she changed careers, changed locations, changed in so many ways; came to believe that knowing the way was not just something. It was everything. And that like those people who, before Liturgical Styles, Books of Common Prayer, Apostolic Succession or even an agreed upon set of scriptures to call their own, called themselves people of the Way, Irene believed that the whole thing was centered on Jesus. Not the far away, theoretical, artistically rendered Jesus, nor the one brandished like a cudgel against others who do not see things the way we do.

Irene increasingly followed the Way of the One who lived as God and Humanity fully integrated and fully alive. As Wes said in his comments in the Post-Dispatch, “She always had a sense of being aware of and connected to the spiritual world.” That “awareness of and connection to”, became richer and deeper as time went on. Irene came to agree with Rob Bell in his claim that *all of life is spiritual* and she took that claim so seriously that she constant challenged everyone she met to live not a fuller spiritual life but the fullest possible life!

I feel compelled to say all of this because of something else the Celts see. Among them there is no great distinction between the living and the dead. They hold that there is no great separation between this world and the next. We are simply living at the same time in different proximities to the presence of God. God loves the dead in the next world just as he loves us here. We, the living, meet the dead, when we share the love of God, the love of one another and the love of Creation. It is in these moments that we are less than the width of an eyelash from one another, those of us in this world and those who are in the next, and even closer than that to God.

In my wondering about my role as preacher today, in my wrestling with what to actually say, that eyelash width was often bridged by a sense of Irene’s presence. And in those moments, as was so often the case in our conversations over the years, when I started to slide toward the comfortable

and too easy approach with this sermon, I heard her voice say what she often said when she was about to deliver the goods, I heard Irene's voice say "Lawler!"

That's how it would start. If it was on the phone, I could hear a shift in the tone of voice. If it was in person, one could see a gesture or a look that expressed the rising impatience. Thomas, I might be. But Irene, she was rarely Thomas. I am sure most of you know what I mean here.

In preparing for this, the words I heard from that next world were, "Lawler, tell them about Jesus. Tell them that he shows us humanity and divinity come together. Tell them that we are to live fully and that to live fully is to love fully." Here there might be only a slight pause in her words. When Irene had something to say, it got said. "And then tell them to get busy showing that love to others. Tell them, Lawler! Tell them"

So, consider yourself told. And consider yourself only an eyelash width away from Irene, who wants to stay connected to you, in the presence of God, in the communion of Saints and who wants you to be expressions of God's love for others.

There is one other way the Celts enrich our understanding of life with Christ that bears mentioning today. They offer a vision of baptism where the water sprinkled on us or into which we are submerged takes us from being in the proximity of grace and God's bounty to swimming in the grace of a world increasingly emerging as the locus of God's gracious love, the kingdom of those no longer dead to themselves, one another and God but resurrected into the new life of grace and love.

We do not wait for this kingdom to come as much as we prayerfully, carefully and vigorously allow it to grow through us into larger and deeper expressions moment-to-moment, day to day.

That world we swim in, together as the Saints, has those of us who walk yet this earth as part of the same school as those we can no longer see swimming on just slightly ahead.

Call it the place of memory, call it the dawning of the Kingdom, call it a glimpse into the next world, call it whatever you will.

But whatever you do, do not neglect to be mindful of its presence. Irene was and is living in that Presence. She is patiently and yet impatiently, swimming on just ahead.

There is a wonderful hymn that expresses this sense. It comes to us from the Old Celt to English through the Iona Community:

From the falter of breath,  
through the silence of death,  
to the wonder that's breaking beyond;  
God has woven a way, unapparent by day,  
for all those of whom heaven is fond.  
From frustration and pain,  
through hope hard to sustain,  
to the wholeness here promised, there known;

Christ has gone where we fear and has vowed to be near  
on the journey we make on our own.

Irene made the journey her own as a follower of the Way.

Today she asks, "What lies ahead for you? What way will you follow?"

There is more to the prayer that began this sermon. It continues:

God in our thinking,  
God in our sleeping,  
God in our waking,  
God in our watching,  
God in our hoping,  
God in our life,  
God in our lips,  
God in our soul,  
God in our heart.  
God in our sufficing,  
God in our slumber,  
God in our ever-living soul,  
God in our eternity.

And we might add:

God with us as followers of the Way.

Amen