

March 24, 2019  
John 5: 1-9  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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### ***Celtic Series: Thin Places***

#### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today's theme in our Celtic Series is thin places. In Celtic tradition a "thin place" is a place where the spiritual space between heaven and earth is experienced as oh so thin.

One type of thin place in Celtic lands is a holy well, a small spring that bubbles up from the ground. These have been identified as sites for healing and renewal.

When Ron and I were in Ireland there was such a well near the cottage in which we were staying. This well, found among trees in a secluded clearing, is called *The well of St. John the Baptist*. It is very small, low to the ground and marked by a circle of stones.

I wasn't surprised to see a few coins in the water – a modern day custom. What did surprise me was the many strips of cloth hanging from the branches above the well. People use these strips of cloth to ritually bathe the parts of their body in need of healing and then hang the cloths above the well. In other words they lay down their burdens, down by the well.

The setting for today's scripture reading is a well. This well too was believed to be a site of healing. The belief was that when the water was stirred up it meant there was an angel present. The first one in would be healed.

#### SERMON

Throughout the centuries, Christians have acknowledged that there are two books by which we learn about God – the book of scripture and the book of creation. At times the Roman church has focused almost exclusively on scripture. The Celtic tradition, on the other hand, has always given deep reverence to the book of creation. So when they speak of thin places, they mean physical places, where they find themselves particularly aware of the presence of God.

In Celtic tradition the isle of Iona, on the west coast of Scotland, is identified as a thin place. We've mentioned Iona before in this series, so let me tell you a bit about it. It is physically a small island – only 1.5 miles wide by 3 miles long – with about 120 permanent residents – not unlike some islands along the coast of Maine. And, not unlike some places in Maine, you can't get there from here. Indeed, it is quite a pilgrimage to get there. We took a car, then a bus, then a plane, then another plane, then a train, then a ferry, then a bus, and then another ferry.

Iona is the cradle of Christianity in Scotland. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, St. Columba and his followers came from Ireland and founded a monastery on Iona. It is one of the oldest centers of Christianity in Western Europe.

The present-day stone abbey, which is much larger than you would expect, was rebuilt in the late 1930s under the direction of the Rev. George MacLeod. He also founded the present-day Iona Community, which is an ecumenical Christian religious order, with headquarters in Glasgow. Some of you know Bobby and Phyllis Ives who are part of this community.

Both the island itself and the stone abbey are sites of pilgrimage for about 130,000 people each year. If you ever feel drawn to go, I would recommend planning to stay for a few days.

Thin places are places of awe. Here in Maine, Mt. Katahdin has been just such a place for thousands of years. For people around the world, mountains are thin places, both physically and spiritually. If you're not a mountain person, maybe you sense awe sitting on the shore watching the sun rise. Or maybe you feel drawn to the woods.

One of my experiences with a thin place, long before I knew such a term, was as a young teenager visiting Muir Woods just north of San Francisco. I knew we were going to see a redwood forest, but I had no idea what an impact it would have on me. Standing in the deep silence surrounded by the majestic giants, I felt as if time stood still and I had a heightened sensitivity to all around me. It was many years later before I had the language to name the religious significance of this experience.

Thin places are also places of healing. Like the Beth-zatha pool for Jews, or holy springs of Celts or the river Ganges for Hindus.

Thin places are places of worship. And places of worship are designed to be thin places. Think about it for a moment. This space where we gather on Sunday mornings is meant to be thin place. Those who design worship spaces seek to create a space where we will sense that the distance between heaven and earth is oh so thin. They design a space that pays attention to the book of scripture and the book of creation.

I enjoy watching people's reactions when they come into this space for the first time. As you come in the ceilings are not that high, for there are balconies over our heads; but when you get into the inner sanctuary the ceiling soars and people invariably find themselves looking up. And they often find themselves saying, "Wow." It is like looking up into the sky. I think the original plans were to paint the ceiling blue, as if it were the sky.

Some church buildings have clear glass windows, to help us be visually connected to the book of creation. There is a UCC church in Sedona, Arizona where the whole front wall of the church is glass and looks out over the stunning red rocks. With a view like that, I must say it is often hard to pay attention to anything happening in the building.

Some church buildings have stained glass to help tell the biblical stories and the stories of church history. Our balcony windows depict the writers of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Our building itself is a cruciform structure, meaning it is shaped like a cross. So when people say to me, "Where is the cross?", I respond, "You're standing in it."

But, this building is a modified cruciform structure, with more of a circle here at the front. That is to honor the congregational heritage of the people gathering for meeting and being able to look at one another.

In this sanctuary space, we have the opportunity to, individually and collectively, give our attention to the presence of God. We come  
- offering praise in awe of the gifts of life,  
- and seeking healing for our brokenness

It is not a space where we expect to come face to face with evil. It is not a space in which we expect to experience violence. And yet that is exactly what happened last weekend in New Zealand when 50 people were killed at their mosques – at their thin places – the places they had come to worship. Not only were people violated physically, but it also attacked their deep spiritual need to be safe in their thin place.

A couple of weeks ago I spoke about the Celtic theology of original blessing – the idea that what is deepest in us is the light of God, for we have been created in the image of God. Because we affirm original blessing does not mean we are oblivious to the realities of sin and evil. In fact, we come together to gain the courage to confront the principalities and powers.

In recent years various peoples have been attacked in their sanctuaries:

-Muslims in New Zealand.

-Jews in Pittsburgh.

-Black Christians in Charleston.

All targets by what we have been inclined to call lone wolves. However, those who have been studying these acts of violence, including Kathleen Belew – an assistant

professor of history at the University of Chicago – advice us to connect the dots. Professor Belew and others point out that these domestic terrorists are part of a white supremacy movement that is fostered by easy access to one another through social media.

If you would like to send a word of support to the Muslim communities in Portland and Lewiston, there are cards to sign in the vestry.

We started with a scriptural story about a well that was believed to be a thin place. We have just such a well in our sanctuary – the font of baptism. When we gather at the font of baptism, we come to a well of living water - a holy well of blessing, reminding us of God's original and ongoing blessing for each person.

Yet, it is also a well that can hold all the grief and all the burdens - both personal and communal - that are part of our lives. It is a well where we can lay our burdens down, be renewed and be emboldened to follow in the Way of Jesus.