

## St. Brigid and Soul Friendship

Teresa Di Biase, St. Augustine's in the Woods, May 7, 2017

*LET US PRAY*

*Father above us;*

*Son beside us;*

*Spirit within us;*

*The Three all around us.*

*AMEN*

This morning I want to introduce you to a remarkable woman known as Brigid of Kildare. Last fall, Frank and I visited Kildare in Ireland. Contrary to what you might expect, the cathedral in that town, which is called St. Brigid's, belongs to the Anglican communion and has been Anglican since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. On the north side of the cathedral are the restored foundations of an ancient fire temple. In pre-Christian times it is thought that priestesses used to gather here to tend ritual fires invoking the Celtic goddess Brigid to protect the herds and provide a fruitful harvest. After the historical St. Brigid built her monastery in Kildare in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, she and her nuns continued to tend the holy flame, which was fed unceasingly for centuries. In 1993, long after the original fire had been extinguished, a Roman Catholic order of nuns living in Kildare built a new fire at the opening of a justice and peace conference in honor of St. Brigid. Now the fire burns perpetually once again in a new retreat center in Kildare run by this order, and Frank and I have made it part of our itinerary for our September pilgrimage to Wales and Ireland.

Who was St. Brigid? Some think she was the daughter of an Irish chieftain and a Christian slave who worked in his household. She may even have been a druid before becoming a Christian. We do know that she shares a name with a pre-Christian goddess, and that she was born at a time when the old gods of ancient Ireland were giving way to Christ and the Christian God.

There are many stories and legends about Brigid. One has to do with the cross I am wearing, which is known as Brigid's cross. In St. Brigid's time, it was customary for rushes to be strewn on the floor of a home. The story is that one day Brigid visited a pagan chieftain who was on his deathbed. As she sat by his bed, Brigid reached down and picking up some rushes from the floor, wove them into a cross. When asked what she was doing, Brigid told the chieftain about the significance of the Christian cross and

of God's love for all people, including him. He was overcome by the idea that he could be loved so much and was converted to Christianity before he died.

If this story reminds you of the legend of St. Patrick plucking a shamrock to illustrate the concept of the Trinity to a group of questioners, you have intuited the significance of Brigid for the Irish church. Brigid is the female counterpart to Patrick, and her importance is evident in a host of prayers addressed to her over the ages. She is honored as a consummate nurturer of all that is good – including, the medieval Irish believed, of the baby Jesus, for was not the Nativity the thinnest of thin places, when heaven and earth, the eternal and the temporal, came together? To the medieval Irish mind, unhindered by our modern devotion to cold, hard facts, it was perfectly reasonable to assign to Brigid the role of wet nurse to the infant Christ. This explains why one of Brigid's titles is "Mary of the Gaels."

Even though none of the many stories about the saint are historically verifiable – at least in the modern sense of history -- common themes emerge in the picture of Brigid that must certainly testify to an underlying truth. One of these is her concern for the poor. That concern, of course, comes from God's own concern, and this is one of the points that we hear the afflicted Job making in his own defense in today's Old Testament reading. As for Brigid, it is said that one day when she was on a long journey, she stopped to rest by the wayside. A wealthy woman, hearing that Brigid was in the neighborhood, brought her a beautiful basket of choice apples. No sooner had the gift been presented than a group of poor people came by and begged for food. Without hesitation Brigid distributed the apples among them. The donor was utterly disgusted and said to Brigid, "I brought those apples for you, not for them." And Brigid's reply was, "What is mine is theirs."

Other characteristics of Brigid are her courage, her care for creation, and her rejection of violence. All of these are illustrated in the contemporary icon of St. Brigid that is on display in the front of the church, and which is reproduced and explained in your bulletin. But the theme I want to focus on this morning is that of Brigid as soul friend and spiritual mother.

About a century before Brigid lived in Ireland, our friend Pelagius, about whom Frank taught last Sunday, wrote a letter which is as relevant today as it was so many centuries ago. "Indeed we each need one special friend," Pelagius says, "who may be called a friend of the soul. We must open our souls completely to this friend, hiding

nothing and revealing everything. And we must allow this friend to assess and judge what he sees.”

This is the same message that is illustrated by the story of Brigid and the young cleric that was told in an early Life of the saint, which Frank read to us a little while ago. The scene is the monastery where Brigid is the abbess. Like many Celtic monasteries, it was a double monastery, consisting of a men’s community and a women’s community. In every case where there was a double monastery, a woman was the one in charge. We get a hint of the extent of Brigid’s leadership abilities by another story about her. In that tale Bishop Mel of Ireland is prompted by the Holy Spirit at the time of Brigid’s clothing as a nun to utter over her the words of a bishop’s consecration, much to the horror of the male clergy present! It sounds like Bishop Mel was at least 1500 years ahead of his time!

But back to soul friendship. In the story that Frank read, Brigid, by the gift of second sight, understands that the young cleric before her has been deprived by death of his soul friend, or *anam cara* as it is known in Gaelic. Brigid must have known from personal experience how important such a friend is in any Christian’s life. She herself was known to have been a soul friend to others, including the famous voyager St. Brendan. Brigid actually represents a long spiritual tradition of *anam cara* that is shared by all the Celtic lands.

The Celtic Christians knew that walking a path of faith is nearly impossible without a true friend and companion. In this morning’s Gospel reading, the evangelist links friendship, self-disclosure, and obedience to Jesus’s way of love. Jesus is addressing his disciples not as their lord and master but as a friend who has disclosed what is most precious to himself, the relationship he has with his Father. We are to be like Jesus, self-disclosing, loving and vulnerable to one another. With Jesus as our model, we are called to companion one another with compassion and love on the journey of life.

Soul friendship, then, is distinctive because it manifests a relationship marked by self-disclosure and vulnerability, by mercy and understanding, and its aim is to support growth in holiness and love. Some people have a special gift for soul friendship that is nurtured by professional training, and they are often called spiritual directors. I have met with a spiritual director regularly for over 25 years. Recently my spiritual director, who was really a kind of spiritual mother like Brigid, retired and moved to Oregon. I would have felt like that young cleric, a body without a head, had I not already been

part of an *anam cara* group, a small group of friends who meet regularly to share what is deepest in our lives with one another.

One of our *anam cara* group tells a story that illustrates what *anam cara* is all about. My friend, who is a retired Episcopal priest, first met John in the waiting room between meetings with the bishop who was to decide whether or not they would proceed in the discernment process for ordination as priests. They did, indeed, go on to seminary together and remained close friends until John's death in 2013. My friend said they were the kind of comrades "who frequently called each other, years into ministry, and said, 'I know we covered this in such and such a class, but I don't remember the answer. What do I do about such and such?'" She told our *anam cara* group, "Once there was a class reunion we held at John's home in St. Louis several months before what would have been our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of seminary graduation. John was unable to travel by then due to a rare neurological disease that took away all his physical abilities, but not his mind. At the close of two incredible days of deep sharing about our lives we asked John to preside at Eucharist around the coffee table. John protested at first saying, 'But you won't be able to understand my speech.' In unison, we said, 'John, we all know the words!' Our classmate, Scott, was John's deacon. We all cried our way through that time that transcended words."

"*Anam cara*," says my friend, "is like my relationship with John. I can say, 'I know I should know this, but help me remember the answer to this ... or that ...' And you'll say, 'Yeah, I have trouble remembering that too but I think the answer might be this ... or that ... or I just don't know.' And when I say to you, 'I'm just not able to do this or that, I'm just not up to the task, you'll humbly serve as my deacon, holding the book, and pointing to the words if I lose my place.'"

There's a wonderful little story of St. Brigid that gives yet another glimpse of *anam cara*. One day Brigid saw a man walking in the valley by the bank of a river bent under a load. She felt pity for him and said to her nuns, "Let us go to the man and carry his load with him on our way." And so they did.

Do you have a soul friend with whom you can share your load? It need not always be a load of trouble or of sin; it can also be a load of wondering or of joy. Is God calling you to be a soul friend to another? Perhaps you will be prompted to seek out a few persons who are willing to commit to the kind of deep non-judgmental listening and to prayer

for one another that is soul friendship. *Anam cara* is not just a feature of Brigid's time; it is a gift for all of us today.

However we might experience *anam cara*, whether it be through a wise and compassionate friend or spiritual director or through a group, it is Christ who is our deepest and truest *anam cara*, isn't he? -- the one who knows us better than we know ourselves, the one who loves us more profoundly than we have ever been loved by another. "I no longer call you servants," says Jesus, "I call you my friends." And as our truest *anam cara*, Jesus invites each one of us to communion with him, at the Eucharistic table of total acceptance and total love. AMEN.

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