

Isaiah 44:6-8; Psalm 86:11-17; Rom 8:12-25; Matt 13:24-30, 36-43

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Year A – July 23, 2017

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Paul in his letter to the Romans speaks profoundly that we are all children of God. We are all adopted children of God, led by the Spirit of God. “...it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” (Romans 8:16-17). That’s good news we hear from Paul, especially on this day that Grace Adelyn Gorman will be baptized. She is an in-the-flesh reminder that we are all children of God.

With that gift of being children of God comes responsibility and we are reminded of that responsibility as we renew our own baptismal vows on this day. As children of God we are called to live the way God intends for us to live—to somehow absorb the sufferings of this present time and to live into the hope for things we cannot see now. The sufferings of this present time are not only the things we hear in human lives that are beyond understanding but also the ways creation suffers. That’s a tall order for us as Christians and children of God.

The week before this past one, I had the opportunity to go on a short retreat given by John Philip Newell at Mercy Center in Madison, CT. Mercy Center is right on the seashore, and I had a room that overlooked the wonder of the ocean. All around the facility are glassed areas where one can sit and be inspired by water

and birds—there were egrets feeding just off the shore on large rock formations each morning. John Philip Newell is a Church of Scotland minister who has served at St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh and Warden of Iona Abbey. He's also been Warden of Spirituality for the Anglican diocese of Portsmouth. A year ago when I saw that he was coming to Mercy Center, I signed up to attend. The retreat filled up quickly, and there were some 140 of us there. John Philip Newell is a scholar of Celtic Spirituality and we were asked to read one of his many books—this one entitled *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*. Newell finds Celtic spiritual roots in the New Testament, particularly in John's Gospel with the image of John as the one who lies against Jesus at the Last Supper and hears the heartbeat of God. John has become of Celtic image for listening to God in all of life.

The little book we were asked to read covers a brief history of Celtic Spirituality. It teaches about 4th century theologian Pelagius, 5th to 6th century Brigid of Kildare, 20th century Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and others. Celtic Spirituality sees God in all things—in humans and in creation. When I was in seminary I learned about heretics throughout time, and Pelagius was one of those heretics. This retreat and this little book opened my eyes to more than what I learned in seminary. Pelagius professed the goodness in all of creation, he taught women how to read scripture, and he had a conviction that in a newborn child one

could see the image of God. I believe we can see the image of God in this little child Grace who is about to be baptized.

In the year 664 there was a synod convened at the monastery of the Abbess Hilda in Whitby where theologians gathered to discuss and resolve issues in the early church. At that synod the Celtic mission of seeing God in all things was rejected and the Roman mission from Canterbury that professed St. Peter as the authority of the church was chosen as the preferred mission. Peter was seen in Matthew's Gospel as the rock upon which God would build God's church. Newell writes that it was a tragedy that the Synod of Whitby would displace either the Celtic tradition of John or the Roman tradition of Peter. From that synod Celtic spirituality began to fade away in its displacement.

Pelagius taught that every child is conceived and born in the image of God—“that the newborn, freshly come forth from God, contains the original, unsullied goodness of creation and humanity's essential blessedness.”¹ Newell is part of bringing to light the Celts and what they believe. He has begun the School of Celtic Consciousness and leads retreats in the U.S. and at the holy island of Iona of the coast of Scotland. He tells the powerful story of seeing his first grandchild and holding her for the first time. Her name is Ember, named so because she was born in the darkest part of the Scottish winter. After holding her for about 2 hours, the

¹ John Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 13-14.

peaceful child looked at him in the eye. He not only saw the face of God in the child, he felt God looking back at him, and he wept.

So, little Grace will be baptized on this day, and we surely see the image of God as we gaze on her—the unsullied goodness of creation and humanity’s essential blessedness that Pelagius professed.

I continue to learn and invite you to do the same as we are reminded of the enormous responsibilities we each have as children of God. Paul reminds of that responsibility as do our baptismal vows we reaffirm each time we welcome a new child of God into our midst. We are called to see God in all things, in all people, in all aspects of God’s creation, knowing the love that has been given to us in Jesus Christ.

We rejoice in that good news this day and we rejoice in Grace’s baptism.

Let us pray with some words from John Philip Newell’s book *Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter*.

“Like an infant’s open-eyed wonder
and the insights of a wise grandmother,
like a young man’s vision for justice
and the vitality that shines in a girl’s face,
like tears that flow in a friend bereaved

and laughter in a lover's eyes,
you have given me ways of seeing, O God,
you have endowed me with sight like your own.
Let these be alive in me this day,
let these be alive in me.”²

² John Philip Newell, *Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 17.