

June 15, 2025
Trinity Sunday

A Pilgrimage Discovery: Saint Martin of Tours

Last night, after spending more than a few hours mulling over and rewriting this sermon, I thought about what is happening on our world. A horrendous plane crash in India with too many lives lost. Protests in our nation's streets. Peaceful rally in our town yesterday and many others. A United States Senator wrestled to the ground during a press conference. A military parade in Washington the likes we have not seen. Did I mention the war between Israel and Iran with missiles and drones flying with the outcome uncertain? The war in Ukraine grinds on. And then yesterday, the terrible and senseless killing and wounding of Minnesota legislators and their families. That is a lot. Too much And I'm sure I missed a few events along the way.

My energy to deliver some good news began to sour a bit last night at around 9 p.m.

Trinity Sunday could not have arrived at a better time!

What I opted for is to talk to you this morning about a person I met a few weeks ago. I had heard his name – vaguely – but that was about it. I came to learn of the over-sized role he would have in shaping generations of Christians who came after him.

As some of you know, two weeks ago I returned from a pilgrimage to France. A small group of pilgrims came together to explore the Celtic roots in the western most part of the country: Brittany. As the name suggests, it is a region with connections to Great Britain – just across the English Channel. Rather than being a barrier or forming a boundary, the sea was an ancient highway that carried traders and monks and soldiers far and wide. Just west of the beaches of Normandy where so many brave service men and women lost their lives in D-Day in 1944, lays a region that still retains – though in shrinking numbers, the ancient Bretton language – a linguistic cousin of Welsh and Cornish, and more distantly Irish and Scottish.

I appreciate what a gift and blessing it is to have the opportunity to wander a bit. Pilgrimage is an action shared by many world religions for centuries and is even having its own moment today as many seekers are hitting the *Camino* in Spain on trekking their way to Santiago de Compostela.

The Welsh priest R. S. Thomas wrote that:
the point of traveling is not to arrive
but return home
Laden with the pollen you shall work up
Into the honey the heart feeds on.

So, I have been thinking a bit about that pollen that got worked up along the way as I return home to continue my work with you to build up this community of believers.

When we think of the Celts many of think of Ireland and Scotland. St. Patrick makes his annual appearance. Yet many are rediscovering the values and culture of these people who lived on the edges of the Roman Empire for centuries. How they believed in the goodness of creation, how

every human being was created in the image of God. How important community was for them. They favored lived experience over doctrine and dogma.

Fortunately for history, they were a people who loved and longed to travel. Their monks and holy men and women cross oceans and set out into the unknown on a journey for God.

Much of our time together centered on learning about and walking in the footsteps of one man. His name was Martin.

He was born in the 4th century – before the Nicene Creed was agreed upon -- in what is today the nation of Hungary. Today, Martin would be called a ‘military brat’ as his father was a high-ranking military officer and the family moved wherever he was stationed. His parents were not Christians. In fact, just a few years before Martin was born it was illegal to practice the faith of Christ and believers were routinely persecuted by the Empire.

Something profound happened to Martin at the age of ten. He heard the call of the Gospel and wanted to leave his family and become a hermit, which was quite popular at the time. Imagine that conversation with his pagan parents. The answer was ‘no’ and Martin was forced to join the army with his brothers at the age of 15. It would be decades before he completed his military service.

Yet through those years Martin’s faith only grew and deepened. One day he met a beggar who was freezing and had next to no clothes on his back. As the story goes, the young soldier removed his own outer cloak and with his sword, cut it half and gave it to the beggar, leaving himself with a small remnant. That night, he had a vision from Christ. The words of Matthew 25 came true: to clothe one of the least is to clothe Christ himself.

Fast forward, when he was free to fully live out his faith, Martin met people who would later become saints of the church, as would he. He sat at their feet and learned from them. His greatest gift and innovation was to set up monasteries in places that never seen such communities. Remember Christianity was a very new faith far away from Jerusalem and Rome: Martin was in the back country of Gaul, today’s France. Under Martin’s guidance people came together to work, pray, and create community. One of those places was named *Marmoutier*, which means “place of the big family.” He would become a famed healer and holy person the world would forever know at St. Martin of Tours. Saint Martin is the patron of the poor, soldiers, conscientious objectors, tailors, and winemakers.

Poor Martin was even tricked into becoming a bishop. The people of Tours asked him first, and he declined their offer. So, they got him to come to the city by saying that someone was sick and needed ministering to. Martin tried to hide but they grabbed him and ordained him a bishop.

What became even more clear to me than before, in visiting the place for Martin lived, started communities and standing at the exact place where he died, was how his faith was shaped by the lives of those who lived before him. Martin shaped those who came after him. Ninian of Scotland visited him as sat at his feet. Ninian would later teach Brendon of Ireland and David of Wales, who would shape Columba of Iona and St. Brigit and so many other Celtic Christians saints in Ireland and Scotland and beyond.

What has not been lost from these Christian Celts, though they lost influence when the power of the Roman Church swept across the islands, was their love for the Trinity. They found ways to pray the Trinity into all parts of their life. They believed the world was infused with all pervading presence of God.

A practice that has continued until recent times: When a baby was born, in the very first moments, a mother would commend the baby to the Trinity – and infant handed over the fire warming the house three times. The neighbors who assisted in the birthplace three drops of water on its forehead. This was the mother's baptism before the priest ever arrived.

When sons and daughter left home, they were committed to the care and protection of the Trinity:
 The peace of God be to thee,
 The peace of Christ be to thee,
 The peace of Spirit be to thee,
 During all they life,
 All the days of thy life.

You might notice that we when we celebrate communion today, we pray our way through one way to understand this mystery: For with your co-eternal Son and Holy Spirit, you are one God, one Lord, in Trinity of Persons and in Unity of Being; and we celebrate the one and equal glory of you, O Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Words fail to fully express what is a perfect relationship of love: neither of the three identities are compromised and all is shared. It is how God should be experienced.

The Trinity is the ultimate expression of community. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is how this mystery becomes a model for faithful living. In a moment in our public life when some forces would like to convince us otherwise, we are mutually dependent upon one another. The joy of the other should be our joy. The pain experienced by another should matter to us somehow. The injustice inflicted on others should make us all question where we stand and what it is we believe in.

The Trinity is community.

In my life, I have asked many of the same questions you have about how God works and is made known to us. How is it that one brief encounter with a stranger can change the course of our lives? How one act of kindness can turn a person's life around. How compassion is perhaps the truest way to the heart of Christ.

Let's learn from the Christian Celts – lift up the experience of the Holy Trinity as community. Let others work out the doctrine and appreciate this mystery as a gift.

(Citations from Ester de Waal: Every Earthly Blessing)