

“Another Parable”

Sermon on Sunday, August 3, 2025

Dear church,

This morning, I would like to tell you a different parable, a counter-parable to the one that Jesus told, which we just heard, - about a rich fool who was self-centered, greedy and focused on the accumulation of goods. We could easily find that sort of character in our society today, someone who is always looking to have more..., but I would rather spend time on a positive example: the inspirational story of George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community.

Iona is one of the so-called Hebrides islands situated on the Western coast of Scotland. On that island sat an old abbey, abandoned and run down, sad looking, a mere remnant of its Christian past. It was restored starting in the 1920's, largely completed by 1956, and repurposed with so much success that it received a huge government grant in the year 2,000 which sustained and completed the work begun by the people.

Perhaps one day some of us can travel there and worship and see for ourselves what that place is like. What I love about the Iona story is that it combines so many of our core values, above all social justice, the discovery of deep spirituality, community, the courage to do things differently, and sensitivity to the environment.

The visionary behind it was George McLeod, a Presbyterian Minister born not in the last century, but the century before that, in 1895. Ancient times... One of my grandfathers was born in 1894, - it was that generation. McLeod came from a family with a long line of Presbyterian ministers. But his own father was a businessman and later a Unionist member of parliament; the family of his mother owned cotton mills. Young George could have easily made a nice living from this foundation of privilege and higher education, which was given to him like a birthright. In the metaphor of the gospel, we might say that George McLeod could have built much bigger barns, stored the harvest and enjoyed a good life. Again, it would be easy to find those kinds of characters in our society today. But the war, the horrible war between 1914 and 1918, of which he saw some of the most gruesome battles, changed him profoundly. He was awarded several medals for bravery and could have returned home as a hero. But he decided to dedicate his life to a higher cause: ministry.

The times when he stepped into ministry, they were rough. The Great Depression followed the Great War. It hit people in many parts of the world,

especially in the urban centers. To everyone's surprise this young, prominent, up and coming pastor, after spending some time in a nice parish in Edinburgh, transitioned to one of the poorest working-class neighborhoods of Glasgow, the city of his birth.

He became the minister at Govan Old Parish Church - encountering considerable social problems: unemployment, poverty, lack of resources, pollution. He engaged with it all, and the pace of the work quickly took its toll, leading to a breakdown. Spending time recuperating in Jerusalem in early 1933, he worshipped in an Eastern Orthodox Church on Easter Day and felt a profound spiritual experience, a sense of recovery of the Church as the corporate Body of Christ. This influenced him for the rest of his life, fueled his sense of hope and his ecumenical spirit. The founding of the new Iona community was a result of that.

The restoration of the old abbey was a project in which many of MacLeod's core beliefs and his vision for a new church, a church fit for the industrial age, converged. He saw opportunities where others saw problems. For example, with high unemployment becoming rampant, he hired unemployed laborers and combined them with young ministers in training for the restoration project. That was not only smart and gave many unemployed craftsmen a purpose and a modest stipend; it also exposed a new crop of church leaders to the realities of life among the less privileged. They worked side by side.

Iona would not just be a shiny restoration project, to be marveled at by future tourists. It would not become a museum piece like so many church buildings today. It became a lively community and a place of creative worship in a language people understood, because much of it came from the people themselves, engaged in writing prayers and liturgies and reaching deep down into their souls.

George MacLeod's very life is a counter parable to the gospel lesson for today. He was not afraid to risk privilege and lay down his life for Christ. He was not afraid to stir controversy. He was a pioneer who saw church beyond the confines of the local parish. He was sometimes called a maverick or a socialist for his love of the poor and his unconventional approach. And yet, judging by our standards today, the fruit of his work feels holistic. He never lost awareness of the need to balance an active (and activist) life with contemplation. George MacLeod is not listed among the saints. But he was as close to a Protestant saint as they come.

As we in our parish look for a path to embrace the gospel for our times, to remain a meaningful spiritual resource for people in the 21st century - filled with new technologies, anxieties, loneliness, distraction, lostness... may this old and true story inspire us to determine where God is leading us today. If I were Catholic, I would say, perhaps George MacLeod is praying for us in heaven, rooting for us, cheering us on at St. Peter's. We are not an abbey, but we are an old country church undergoing spiritual restoration. May the spirit rule! **Amen.**