"Baptism and Community"
Matthew 3:1-6 & 13-17 John 15:12-17
F.U.C.A.
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Have you ever thought about how someone close to you, someone with whom you share your life and love, might, with just a slight change in historical events *not* have been in your life? How easily you could have been separated by time, place or circumstance and never come to know each other. Can you imagine your life without this intimate friend? Without him or her, would you even be the "*you"* that you are or see yourself to be.

One of my favorite writers and religious thinkers has his roots in Celtic Christianity. John O'Donohue speaks of the powerful coupling of fate and friends, in his book, *Anam Cara*. Anam Cara is an old Irish, or Gaelic expression which means "soul friend." It is an ancient idea that speaks to the closing of an ancient circle, which happens when two friends discover each other in this life. This goes far beyond our use of the word, "relationship" in reference to a romantic or special bond between two people. Anam Cara begins with an act of deep recognition of another. It is a sacred friendship, for soul friends recognize something of their own soul in the being of the other.

Our culture tends to divide important realities of life into unfortunate dualisms. Things like nature and spirit, earth and heaven, the human and the divine, are seen as separate realities. It is only one step from seeing them as *separate* realties to finding them to be almost *opposite* realities, or even conflicting realities. Romantic love and spiritual love are seen to be quite different from each other, even at odds with each other. For instance, it has long been the belief that priests, nuns and monks must forgo sensual human intimacy in order to find the depth of spiritual intimacy with God that allows them to serve with purity and holiness.

A current film in the theaters is a true story based on this theme. In *Philomena*, a young girl in Ireland in the early 1950's, conceives a child out of wedlock and is sent to live at a convent with nuns, who are cruel to her and end up selling her child to a couple in

America. The justification for all their cruelty is the girl's bodily sin. The nuns have taken a vow of chastity and see pleasures of the flesh as deeply immoral. For many years, people of the Christian faith, holding the belief that the heavenly realm was far superior to the earthly one, developed a disdain for the natural world and for the human body. The notion of "anam cara" comes out of a world-view, which is much different. Celtic Christianity didn't allow itself to be forced into these life-defying dualisms. When St. Patrick landed in Ireland in 432 and established the Catholic faith on the land of the Celts, he did not deny the spiritual imagination of the people he encountered nor the mystical spirit of this land but rather wove these together with his own devotion to Christ into a dynamic unity of the human, the natural, and the divine. Celtic spirituality is at home on both heaven and earth with reverence for the sun, moon, and stars, rocks, and trees. So strange, then, that as time went on, this ancient heritage of the Irish people could have been so over shadowed in the practices of the Catholic Church.

In ancient Celtic spirituality there was a freedom of thought and experience that didn't the separation of nature and spirit. Feeling and intellect, mystery and knowledge, the invisible and the visible were all embraced. "Anam cara" was a sacred bond between people that was both deeply **of** this world and yet profoundly **beyond** it. An "anam cara" friendship occurs in time but is, in many ways, timeless. Ordinary friendship, in contrast, is more like a pleasant acquaintanceship with another. "Anam Cara" friends become not only companions but teachers to each other--even spiritual guides.

This friendship was deemed to be of such value in life that, in earlier times, in Ireland, it was said that, "anyone without a soul friend is like a soul without a body." That may sound odd to us but in Celtic thinking the body is in the *soul*, not the soul in the *body*. Think about the implications of this. In a soul friendship, two people come together, with their human bodies of clay, into the greater and eternal soul of the world. These friendships cut across all convention and categories. Men and women, even monks and nuns, could be soul friends. Without masks or pretensions, or following prescribed social or gender roles they were free to love each other deeply and to find their own identity and destiny.

In soul friendships one feels that they have come home. They belong. They are safe to be themselves. For my last birthday, which also happened to be the late John Denver's 70th birthday, my family gave me a CD, which I have been listening to driving back and forth to work. His songs, in their simple and straightforward way, pluck my heartstrings and I sing along at the top of my lungs. Remember this one "Hey, its good to be back home again. Sometimes this old farm feels like a long lost friend. Hey, it's good to be back home again." Or "Take me home, country roads, to the place I belong, West Virginia, Mountain Mama, take me home, country road." He reminds us how a place can be a home and that being there or even just thinking about it from a long distance away in space and time, can bring you back "home" to the center of yourself. What is true of place, can be true of people too, of old friends with whom you have shared many formative experiences. It can also be true of people who have inspired you or, in some way, speak to you so that you feel understood and known. This can be face-to-face or across the centuries from the pages of a book. What you hear brings you back to yourself, makes your life make more sense, seem suddenly meaningful and rich.

Over the years of my ministry here, I have become even more keenly aware of my sense of connection to the people of this church. We are old friends and new ones, young and not-so-young, male and female, with different interests, financial situations and educational backgrounds. Some of us are drawn to the spiritual aspects of life and some more to its rational dimensions. We are introverts and extroverts, conservatives and liberals. In approaching this notion of soul friendship with its origin in another time and place, I have been wondering just what value it might hold for this congregation's understanding of itself as a community of faith in our time and place.

Let's consider the many healing stories in the Gospels. I have often pondered what these are all about. What was the method by which Jesus healed another? Was it magic, a hocus pocus that flew in the face of nature? For me, the idea of "anam cara" shines some light onto this power to heal. When we are understood, we feel "at home" and we feel a deep freedom to trust and to love. Real love transfigures us. Over and over, Jesus

recognized others through the power of love. John O'Donohue describes Jesus as "the secret anam cara of every individual." In friendship with Jesus or the Christ in each other, we are freed from what binds us to lesser things. We become whole and centered. Through love, we are able to cross the threshold where the divine and the human flow easily together.

John the Baptist recognized Jesus at the Jordan. He knew Jesus with the ancient recognition of "anam cara" and when he baptized Jesus, the power of the holy flowed into the world. In the passage from the Gospel of John, which we read this morning, Jesus makes a point to call his followers his "friends". He says, "I do not call you servants any longer…but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." What is Jesus' deliberate intention here? It sounds to me like an insightful recognition of community-- a shared and intimate reality among friends. We are in this together, indivisible, equal, sharing out of our abundance, receiving out of our need, devoted to the same divine spirit that guides our lives. Jesus concludes this passage with these words, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

That's it then, that's what all his teaching and healing and miracles and prayer are about--to engender love for one another--to teach our hearts a new art of feeling. There is a clear sense of "anam cara" in these words. In the essence of its spirit, "anam cara" can go beyond the intimate love between two people. In a faith community, in which a depth of love and trust is allowed to develop, perhaps "anam cara" can find a home on earth in the modern world. Perhaps a whole community can be bound in a circle of ancient belonging.

When we baptize babies in our church we declare that, with the eyes of faith, we know this ancient circle to be true. In our church, we don't do private baptisms outside of worship. Baptism is not just a stamp of the holy or an insurance policy for salvation. Baptism is between an individual soul and its heavenly Creator in a deep and mysterious way, but it is also an act of true community. We acknowledge together the wellspring of

love lying nascent within the young souls we baptize. We declare in words and song that we aim to meet this wellspring inside *them* with the wellspring of love within *us*. But there is a third partner in this loving, and in all true loving, and that is the power of the Christ, the power of God to enter human hearts and anoint them for feeling. As O'Donohue says, "When you learn to love and to let your self be loved, you come home to the hearth of your own spirit."

Sure, we baptize many children that we might never see again, and so it may seem as if our congregation's commitment to these children rings a bit false. A child's continued presence among us may be beyond our control, but our love extended in the eternal sacred moment of their baptism is not. Time and space cannot destroy "anam cara." Our blessings have an intention for the children baptized here. We intend that feelings of love be allowed to develop inside them and to flow freely into the world around them throughout their lives as they receive and gather from this same world; peace, delight and deep purpose. Their names are spoken in our prayers and they are written in our tattered book of records.

On Sundays, here at church, I love to watch and listen to the interaction between adults and children. I feel tenderness toward the intimacy I witness in this warm and loving community. We are many generations of people who each just happened to walk into the front door of this church one day, some over 50 years ago and some last week, and who reached out to shake a stranger's extended hand and somehow decided to stay for awhile. In that decision, we each chose to step into the love of this faith community. Sure, many people walk back out that door for their own reasons, but in their absence, the community continues and if and when a person ever finds himself or herself walking back in, they are greeted with real joy as the return of an old and dear friend.

I will close, today, by quoting the familiar poet, Kahlil Gibran, who clearly understands that this sacred unity in soul friendship extends beyond time, as we know it.

> You were born together, and together you shall be for evermore. You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days. Aye, you shall be together even in the silent memory of God.