



A few years ago, Sarah and I were fortunate enough to take a trip to the Emerald Isle, as they call it. And so, we did our usual American touristy part of stimulating the Irish economy by making the trek to their western coast for the Cliffs of Moher: those 700-foot most beautiful behemoths of the rocky edge soaring over the Atlantic. It continued in Dublin with Trinity College, where some of the oldest books in all of Europe fill their library shelves. Then, it was to the other side of

town for St. Patrick's Cathedral, the place where the saint, whom we celebrate today, was supposedly baptized. Soon enough, that most beautiful church building, one of the most famous sites for us American tourists and beyond to visit in all of Ireland, will reach 1,000 years of age. However, there is another place on that island that sticks to the spiritual memory bank a little more deeply.

A couple hours' drive north, we were lost walking around Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland, and we came upon this other cathedral, not nearly the size of St. Patrick's and only about a tenth of the age. There was this priest, who greeted us with a wonderfully serene Irish voice, not to mention a most captivating sense of humor, and the kindest hospitality we could have asked for as the annoying American tourists who didn't know what the heck we were doing driving on different sides of the road, attempting to mark off all the most popular sites from an itinerary list, treating their country as a national adventure park of sorts. But, for whatever the reason, that Christ-like priest didn't see us as any sort of inconvenience. And he wasn't working his pastoral folksy charm to try to convince us to stay for mass that afternoon, and maybe get a few extra offerings to stimulate their congregational economy. Instead, it's almost as if he was under the impression that we were part of the same body of Christ, as if we were connected to the same God of love, the same Gospel that the beloved St. Patrick was transformed by in his lifetime long before, when he believed he finally found Jesus on that most precious island.

But one of the first things that priest invited us to explore in his humble abode, oddly enough, was right beneath our feet. Because, when you walked in the front door to the sanctuary, you were immediately in a labyrinth that was etched in the marble floor over a century before. For many Christians over our collective history, it is a deeply engaging form of prayer, as you walk through a maze of sorts with minimal noise and distraction, to only focus on your steps, your breathing, to feel the Holy Spirit churning inside of you; that Holy Spirit who will not only guide you through a spiritual labyrinth, but throughout a journey of an eternal lifetime.

Now, with this particular rendition at this cathedral, there were two separate lines drawn that invited both members and random visitors to follow: one would take you all the way to the altar up-front. And one darker line would lead you absolutely nowhere. That was meant to be the symbolic experience of sin: that it leads us absolutely nowhere. And that boldest line etched in the floor became all the more enthralling that day when we learned that the Irish people were approaching the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what they call Bloody Friday.

After all, as much as the natural landscape of the Emerald Isle is breathtakingly beautiful, to say the least, with the most tantalizing green you could ever imagine; the history amongst its people is not quite as majestic. For starters, the Republic of Ireland to the south and Northern Ireland have never been on the same page in terms of their allegiance to their neighbors of Great Britain, as well as regarding politics in general or religion, for that matter. Soon enough, the Irish Republican Army emerged, becoming one of the most notorious terrorist groups at the time. So, in protest of the British presence on their homeland, they planted over 20 bombs in Belfast, killing several soldiers and civilians, and injuring over 100. It was yet another reminder of that line, of that part of our humanity that leads us absolutely nowhere: as if we are stuck in a maze of our own lust for power and money and wanting to defeat anyone in our path of fulfilling our itinerary list of personal success.

Nevertheless, there was something else about that line that was just as wondrous as any green scenery in all of Ireland. That line, for some reason, was still kept inside the cathedral. It was not etched to send it out the door, as if to convey that it's the church's job to kick whatever unpleasant about ourselves outside the walls entirely. Instead, that line, the whole part of our humanity, no matter how broken, was, evidently, meant to be embraced by a random Irish priest at the door, embraced by the church in whatever nation, embraced by the God who insists on inviting us all forward to a table of relentless grace and mercy and new life.

So yes, we were lost wondering the streets of Belfast that day, but I like to think we experienced a bit of the wondering Greeks as told in the Gospel story: who wished to see a different kind of hope, a different kind of compassion, a different kind of God. I like to think we experienced a bit of the journey of St. Patrick himself, who found a most precious kind of Jesus on that island. But for us, it wasn't in the behemoths of the Cliffs of Moher or in the ancient Trinity College or the monstrosity of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

We found a most precious kind of Jesus in a folksy priest by a random church building door, who invited us to not only experience his humble abode with a line inviting us all the way to a table for all children of God, no matter where we come from or whatever international or spiritual baggage we carry. No, that Christ-like priest invited us even deeper into the most breath-taking scenery of all: into the very heart of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord, who will always emerge in Belfast, in our own homes, and on a cross, where God has and always will embrace us with grace and mercy and new life, no matter what. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!