

High Feasts & Holy Days

Lesson 10: Beltane/ Gaelic May Day festival (May 1)

5.7.2017

Objectives: Explore historical roots of Beltane and celebrations rooted in nature and the cycle of seasons.

Materials: flipchart, lesson attachment, outdoor space, and festival items including:

- Maypole (wooden post or tetherball pole or patio umbrella stand or similar)
- Ribbons (nailed or zip-tied to the top of the maypole)
- Leaves and flowers (whatever is wild and in bloom or inexpensive)
- Floral wire

Time allotments suggested and meant to be adapted for **75 minute class**.

1. **Nametags and Graffiti Wall** (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ What flowers are currently in bloom in the Twin Cities?
 - ▶ From your most recent worship (likely Coming of Age, April 30), what’s one thing that you remember as interesting or meaningful?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.
- **Please take a few minutes to invite reflections from youth about their recent worship experience. Use copies of worship programs as helpful reminder.**

2. **Silly Fun: Youth Idea** (5 minutes max)

Invite youth to volunteer a silly fun activity that the whole class will enjoy!

3. **Chalice Lighting:** Light the chalice, saying these words together: *“We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”*

Teacher reads: (from American artist, Georgia O’Keeffe)

“Nobody sees a flower really; it is so small. We haven’t time, and to see takes time – like to have a friend takes time.”

4. **Joys and Sorrows** (10 minutes): Listening is a precious gift that we offer one another at church. Using the balance scale and the blue (sorrows) and yellow (joys) stones, invite youth to share a joy and/or a sorrow from the past week, as a way of *meeting* one another with our lives and *sharing* in community. You will want to set limits (e.g. two stones max per person) so that no one monopolizes sharing time.

Each Sunday, a copy of the congregation's Embracing Meditation will be made available to your class, so that stones can be put in for those whose names are being spoken in the Sanctuary.

5. **Discussion of Beltane/May Day** (25 minutes)

Teacher introduces and facilitates discussion:

- The word *Beltane* is from the Irish Gaelic *Bealtaine* or the Scottish Gaelic *Bealtuinn*, meaning *Bel-fire*: the fire of the Celtic god of light, *Bel/Beli/Belinus* (who, in turn, may be traced to the Middle Eastern god *Ba'al*).
- In the pagan year, Beltane is a “cross-quarter day” that falls exactly halfway between an **equinox** (2x each year when day and night are roughly equivalent) and a **solstice** (2x each year when day is longest and shortest). See attachment.
- Traditionally, Beltane was a celebration of life and fertility, marked by bonfires and dancing, flowers, and feasting.

Traditions include:

- Making two bonfires and then passing all livestock and family members between the two fires as a form of ritual purification. Young men also leap over the fires. Bonfires (from “bone fires” connoting human sacrifice) were lit, and leaping the fire was a custom thought to encourage crops to grow as high as the leaper could leap the fire.
 - How is fire a purifying force?
 - We have seen purification rituals before, like cleaning rooms/homes, as part of holy day celebrations. How is purification a religious or spiritual practice?
 - Why do some religious rituals, like bonfire jumping, deliberately entail risk? How is risk a spiritual experience? (*Hint: think about “leap of faith” and what risk summons.*)
- Putting up a Maypole with ribbons. Young, unwed people dance around the pole together, weaving the ribbons together.
 - Why is dancing often a part of religious celebrations? What other celebrations include dancing?
 - Why would this ritual be limited to unwed participants? (*Hint: think sex, maypole as phallus, fertility*)

- It's also a tradition to "go a-Maying," meaning to take a journey to the woods and meadows to gather spring wildflowers, and carrying home armfuls of blossoms. For thousands of years, on May 1, people would go into the fields to collect pretty flowers and exchange them. Townspeople would often process through the village streets, putting flowers on all the houses and buildings. They might wear flowers in their hair, or decorate their houses with flowering branches. *Maying* ritualized the experience of spring. People inside the homes would offer them wonderful food and goodies to eat as sort of a spring version of "trick or treat."
 - Sound familiar? For those who have participated, what is Flower Communion?
 - What other traditions or holy days can you name that are based on nature and the cycle of seasons?
 - We have seen many religions with holy days and festivals that ritualize nature's cycle of seasons, with symbols and observances that help make sense of the natural world and our place in the universe. Some scholars have even argued that (all?) religions begin as earth-based religions. If we assume that to be the case, do you think religions are generally positive, negative, ambivalent, neutral, unconcerned about the earth/nature? Depends from religion to religion?

6. Outdoor Activities for Beltane (35 minutes)

1. Meet outside in the garden space and find materials. (If weather not permitting, find indoor space and have some youth hold up maypole.)
2. Erect the maypole and dance around it, weaving the ribbons. Half the group dance and skip clockwise while the other half skips counter-clockwise, all the while weaving in and out, with ribbons in hand. Take some time and have fun!
3. Make flower crowns. Use flowers, leaves, and wire to twist a colorful circle that will fit on your head. Dance around the maypole some more, time permitting!

7. Say goodbye until next time: Extinguish the chalice, saying together:

"May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts."

8. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- return blue/yellow stones to containers
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets