

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

20 Pentecost  
October 2, 2005  
Fr Bill McGinty

**“Ellen the Dance”**

Once upon a time there was a girl called Ellen. She was no ordinary girl. In 1912 she was twelve years old and everyone called her “Ellen the Dance.”

Ellen had two sisters, Mary and Bridget and lived on a farm at Ballygorman Malin Head, in Ireland. Ellen was tall for her age, thin with long legs and wind tossed red hair that cascaded in curls passed her shoulders.

No one could remember a time when Ellen did not dance. She danced at school, at home, at local Fairs and soon for her native county of Donegal. She had fast feet, grace and poise and could kick high to Irish reels, hornpipes and jigs.

At only sixteen she appeared for the first time in the All Ireland National Irish Dance Finals and round after round astonished the audience and judges. No one had seen feet so fast or turns so sharp. In the last round she faced Angela Devine from Cork, three times All Ireland Champion. Everyone expected Angela to win against the unknown girl from Donegal, but they didn't know “Ellen the Dance.” As she completed her final piece the audience rose to their feet shouting her name. She was the champion.

Everyone expected her to be champion for many years to come, but that's not the way it turned out. The following year, aged 17, Ellen set out one day on her bicycle for the village five miles away. It one of those wet and rainy days, on a downhill bend her bicycle slipped on the wet road and she careered over a fence and over a cliff. When she failed to appear for her date, her boyfriend John came looking for her. There she lay in the rocks her legs twisted and broken.

Ellen never ever walked unassisted again. Her life became a nightmare of operation after failed operation, till at 26 her doctors simply gave up. Worse was to come, her spirit was crushed and she became angry and bad tempered, depressed and inconsolable. No one could deal with her. Her boyfriend left for America, her parents sadly died and she was left alone with her sister Mary who ran the farm. She made a living knitting and selling every pattern of Irish Arran sweater. But her angry needles and bitter tongue kept people away and as she grew older her bitterness increased.

In summer months the farm took in summer visitors who came down from the city for a break. That was when Ellen met Jimmy McGready for the first time. Jimmy was ten and arrived with his Father. He was the happiest kid in a wheelchair anyone had ever seen.

It was one of those typical Irish summers Saturday nights, locals gather for the usual night of stories, poetry, music and dancing especially around harvest time. It was also the night that Ellen the Dance was healed.

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It was the night little Jimmy McGready prompted by the music, climbed out of his wheelchair to hobble across the floor to the sound of the fiddle and flute. His twisted little legs moved awkwardly in all directions, but that was not what Ellen saw. She saw the radiant smile of happiness on his young face. She saw the hope and faith in his eyes. It was the night Ellen the Dance looked outside her own pain and she began to cry. But for the first time, her tears were not for herself, they were for someone else.

Healing takes many different forms. That night God spoke to Ellen's spirit and reached deep inside her to heal her soul. Jesus had come to her in the form of a little crippled boy who only knew how to live life with joy. That night Jimmy taught Ellen that you are only as crippled as you allow yourself to be.

With that knowledge Ellen's life changed. Each day she hobbled across the farmyard and down the short lane beyond the trees that protected the house. There she would sit and look down the peninsular to where the Atlantic roared in on the white surfed coastline. There she looked on the bright colored quilt of a landscape that forever changed colors with the seasons. There she prayed and met her God in the words she read in her bible.

Now her anger had gone and in its place she found peace and that gentle Donegal humor and spirit that you find with country people. For the first time she saw her sister Mary, as a person. She realized the sacrifices Mary had made to care for her and as the years rolled on she loved her for it.

Generations of people met Ellen and loved her humor and gentle ways over the years. As she taught them knitting patterns of the most complex kind, little did they know the history of the lady who walked so slowly with the aid of a walking stick. As for little Jimmy McGready, no one ever knew what became of him. In time all forgot him, all except Ellen the Dance.

At different times in our lives we too are crippled people. Our spirits too can be crushed and broken. Family, friends and those we love can be the catalyst that does it to us. It is only when we ourselves look back that often we know, deep in our souls, that so much of our hurt and pain we did to ourselves.

There is a sense in which none of us can ever take back that fight we had with our parents so many years ago. And as the years move on, we replay it in moments of sadness and solitude. We long for healing.

We hurt when we fall out of love so bad that happy memories evaporate before our eyes. We don't know how to deal with pain and in deep desperation we turn to God in a vain attempt to find peace for our crushed spirit.

If there is one thing we all desperately need in our lives it is healing.

It is ironic because if Jesus the Savior of the world demonstrated anything in his life, it was the power of healing. Luke's Gospel in particular portrays Jesus as the healer who brings

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to the needy, the poor, the destitute, the abandoned and the possessed, the mercy and love of God that returns human beings to wholeness. Jesus reaches out to touch and when he does power leaves him and he is left weak.

The miracle healing stories in Luke's Gospel leave no room for doubt. Jesus performs the healing in public. He will use an object, mud, spittle, water, he will touch eyes, ears, hand, and he will lay his hands on the sick person. He will pause, pray, raise his eyes to heaven and say: "Father if it be thy will..." Lastly he will command: "Be healed!"

The power of prayer and the ministry of healing are equally evident in the Early Church. Peter, Paul, John and Philip all have miracle healing stories attributed to them in the Acts of the Apostles. It is Paul writing to the Christians in Greece who instructs them to use the healing power of the Holy Spirit that has been given to them. "If anyone is sick among you gather and pray over him calling down the Holy Spirit upon him and laying hands upon his head that he might be healed."

Today we gather to do precisely this, to bring healing and the Holy Spirit to all who step forward to receive it. In that moment when the hands of this Christian Body rest upon an individual I want the rest of us to pray earnestly to God for healing. In that moment the individual's Baptism unites with the now of their Christian faith and allows the Holy Spirit to flow through them, all we need do is say: "I believe! I believe in you Lord Jesus."

In 1989 I returned to Ballygorman, Malin Head to see "Ellen the Dance" one last time. At 89 her eyes still sparkled and her infectious laugh was still there. Her sister Mary had died the previous year and her favorite niece and her husband now lived with her. We sat on the bench at the end of the lane with the whole of that great view stretched before us like a Van Gohn painting. There she told me the story of "Ellen the Dance" and how little Jimmy with his crooked legs and great smile had brought her healing. She asked me to bless her and bring her healing that she might end her life in peace and in gratitude to God for all the wonderful people he had brought to her.

She died the following year and was put to rest beside her sister Mary. For many months cards and letters flooded in from people all around the world. People in far away places, people who met her, people she wrote to.

If I close my eyes I can still see that beautiful scene with the roaring surf hitting the shoreline and all around purple heathered hills and "Ellen the Dance" skipping down the lane to school, books in hand and red hair blowing in the wind.

As we seek healing today, for all in our Parish family, let us allow the Holy Spirit to blow through our lives also, and bring peace and fellowship, love and humor, now and always.

Amen+

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