

“PILGRIMAGE: WHAT TO BRING?”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Mark 1:16-20; Mark 10:17-22

September 25, 2022

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I grew up with the belief that being a Christian meant that you had prayed a particular kind of prayer to “accept Jesus,” which meant you’d go to heaven eventually. You were *in*, and you didn’t have to worry about it anymore. Some of you probably grew up with a similar understanding – perhaps it wasn’t a particular prayer; maybe it was baptism, or church membership, or believing the right things. Like me, you probably knew that, yes, ideally we were supposed to continue to learn and mature and do fewer bad things and more good things, but none of that was what defined a Christian. The essential movement, if you will, was that one *single* move... from outside to in. It’s odd, really, when you consider that the Bible offers us story after story in which faith is lived as a journey. To be sure, there are plenty of Biblical texts that use the language of belonging as well. But for some reason, historically we’ve tended toward the “you’re either in or you’re out” model in our understanding of what “a Christian” is.

At some point, I came to understand, as many others have, that I had to leave behind that way of thinking about faith. I realized that it no longer made much sense to me. It didn’t reflect the experience of a lot of people, who struggled their way bit by bit into faith, or found that their awareness of God’s love unfolded gradually over the years. It ignored the people who were skeptical about a lot of doctrine but tried to live by Jesus’ teachings. It fostered cliquishness and exclusion and attitudes of judgement that seemed very far from Jesus’ example. It didn’t help us communicate the love of a good and gracious God. And it isn’t much like the way we see Jesus interacting with people in the gospels.

I hope you didn’t mind hearing again (today from Mark’s version) the story about Jesus calling his first disciples. For me, this is a story to come back to again and again, and maybe that’s partly because it is so clearly about the beginning of a journey. Or perhaps it’s a *continuing* journey; maybe Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John were already searching for something – we don’t know. Certainly there’s a moment for each of them in which they decide how to respond, but “follow me” is clearly about, not one instant of decision but a journey. It will be *they follow*, that they will come to understand who Jesus is. To go on that journey, though, they have to leave some things behind. As we all do.

All along the Camino de Santiago, there are makeshift shrines where people walking this ancient pilgrimage route leave things behind: a book, a sweater, extra shoes, a pillow, toiletries. Things they realized, a ways into their journey, that they didn’t need. Apparently nearly every pilgrim who walks that route, no matter how careful their planning, discovers that they are carrying too much. The load is too heavy. Their pack is too full. This thing, or that thing, just isn’t useful, or they find they don’t really want it as much as they thought they did. So they leave it. And they feel lighter and freer as they go on.

Could there be a better metaphor for the way our lives – and our faith journeys – can get bogged down by the things we are carrying or can be freer when we let some things go?! I invite you to think this morning about what you might be carrying that you don't need and that is making your journey harder. I expect we all have something. Maybe it's nostalgia about "the way things used to be" (which, if we're honest is sometimes an overly-rosy vision of the past).

+Old resentments, secrets that maybe shouldn't have been kept, wrongs we haven't made amends for, disappointments, self-deceptions. Things we know we ought to deal with and maybe get help with, but have avoided and avoided.

+Behavior patterns we're wedded to, despite the fact that they don't serve us well.

+Ideas about who and how we were "supposed to" be, what we "should" want out of life.

+An image we thought we needed to present to the world, even if it's not who we really are

+Beliefs we've never really examined

+Expectations about what others in our lives should be or do, and disappointment over the ways that those others haven't cooperated in fulfilling those expectations.

Every one of us probably could add a few things to the list. There are sooo many things that can make our faith journey more of a slog than a joyful adventure with holy purpose. (*This might be a good place to add that if anyone would like to talk more about some of those things, I'd be happy to sit down with you sometime.*)

These things that are too heavy, that we don't need or maybe even want, make it hard to even figure out what it means to follow Jesus. If you've ever carried a really heavy pack or suitcase or box, you know: it's pretty hard to pay attention to where you're going or much of anything else, when all you can feel is that weight.

Those too-heavy, too-many burdens keep us from being fully present on our journey.

They distract us from all there is to be grateful for, from genuinely connecting with God, from encountering others with love and compassion.

They limit our vision of what we could be and do. They keep us stuck in the past; they hold us back and make it hard for us to freely and trustingly hear what God is calling us to in our lives *now*.

We human beings love what is familiar. Sometimes we choose what is familiar over what's different even when the familiar is painful or destructive and deeply lacking. And we cling to what we think of as "ours," whether that be material possessions or habits or feelings or ideas. It can be really hard to let go. It can be hard even to know *what* to let go.

I think that's why *pilgrimage* is helpful. First of all, simply the *notion* of the life of faith as a pilgrimage: where the terrain, and the companions, and the abilities you have, and the direction you feel called to go may change. It's important to know this is normal, and that it's healthy for us to change in our understanding and expression of faith over time.

Intentional pilgrimage is helpful too. Stepping away from your routine gives you the space to discern the truths of your life at this point in your journey. It can be an actual pilgrimage, whether it's a trip far away to a beautiful or sacred site, or a short walk somewhere nearby. It can be a virtual pilgrimage, by means of the internet or a book or some art or your imagination. Or maybe just going alone to a quiet place in your home. Some kind of time out of the routine to unpack those mental, emotional, and spiritual bags and consider what is necessary for your journey as you go forward and what isn't; what is a source of holy joy, and what isn't.

Insight doesn't necessarily come quickly. Someone with experience of pilgrimage said, "How many steps does it take to clear the mind? It takes time, and often thousands of steps." (Granberg-Michaelson, p. 38) Patience is important on a pilgrimage. Discernment is a process and big part of that process is trusting that eventually, if we're listening, God will show us something we need to know.

This discernment is as necessary for us together as it is individually. Communities of faith also hold on to things we don't need, stuff that weighs us down and prevents us from travelling light, being responsive to God's new callings, and going forward together with creativity and joy.

Churches everywhere cling to "the way we've always done things" and idealized memories of the past. We have ideas about church buildings and worship; decision-making structures and finances; programs and traditions we cherish. We have long-held understandings of what church is "for" and what churches are or aren't "supposed to" do. We believe things we haven't bothered to think deeply about. We have expectations for our leaders and our fellow worshippers, and disappointments over unmet expectations. We have a picture of what a "successful" church looks like, and assumptions about who will "fit in." We know who we are and what we do and we are capable of.

We also have a whole history that has loaded us with baggage: the Christian church through the centuries has been involved in a whole lot of exploitation and discrimination and hypocrisy and abuses of power that we have yet to make amends for. Sometimes we've been so attached to a particular interpretation of the Bible that we haven't cared about the people it hurt or excluded. And sometimes we've been so concerned with our economic self-interest or about not offending anyone that we haven't cared what the Bible teaches. We've held on to things we should have repented of.

We may have thought that we had the strength and the faith to carry all of that, and more. But the past few years have shown us that we have to be more discerning about what we hold on to. The pandemic upended our ideas of what worship is "supposed to" look like, and we have had to let go of some old expectations. Events in the world have brought home the reality that there is nothing to be gained by refusing to understand how the past shaped the present. They've pushed us to be less reluctant to speak about social justice. The large numbers of

people who have found “traditional” church irrelevant and not meaningful are causing us to ask questions about *why* we do what we do and if there might be different ways to talk about God and create a sense of community – ways that are perhaps less “church-y” than what we’ve done in the past. We are thinking less about maintaining an institution and more about being a community on a pilgrimage together. But it’s really a challenge to let go of some of those things that have defined “church” in our minds and hearts. The thing is though, *we have to*, if it’s a pilgrimage of faith we’re on. Otherwise, we will simply be drawing a circle to say who is in and who is out.

But if we leave some things behind, we must be bringing some other things, some necessary things with us, right? How do we know what *not* to leave behind.

Our scripture readings give us some suggestions:

Thinking again about Mark 1, I want to point out that the things Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John left behind – their nets, the boats, their family fishing business – weren’t *bad* things. It’s just that a new call came to them, and those things were no longer the things they needed. Not all the things we need to leave behind are negative things. Some of them served us well, blessed us, taught us valuable lessons, helped us with tough things, enabled us to serve and use our gifts. We can let them go with gratitude, understanding that we have changed, our callings have changed, the church has changed, the world has changed.

I imagine that it felt strange to those disciples to not have the nets in their hands at first. Their hands probably felt empty, and they might have felt very unsure of what they were supposed to do or whether they’d have the tools or ability to do it. But you know, we are always in God’s presence with empty hands, always asking for help and grace and strength for what the journey demands. Trusting that our needs will be met, trusting that we’ll be given the gifts we need to do what we are called to do – this is all part of the journey. It is a little scary, but ultimately it frees us to respond as God calls us now.

The verses we read from Deuteronomy summarize the heart and soul of God’s call. “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” You’ll remember that Jesus affirmed this when he was asked about the greatest commandment, and he added (quoting from Leviticus), “Love your neighbor as yourself.” What I particularly like about Deuteronomy is that the words are spoken as the people of Israel are about to enter the promised land, after years of nomadic life. They – and we - are given this core commandment and urged to keep it, hold on to it, tie it to our hands, write it beside our doorways, talk about it at home and wherever we go ... put it in our packs and carry it with us on the journey. It’s not a nice but optional accessory, but a necessity. It’s not a single-use item. We need it every single day.

In the conversation Jesus has with the rich man in Mark 10, we hear a more sobering instruction about what to bring. “Take up your cross,” Jesus says. “Follow me.” So many ways to think about what this means, all of them challenging. It’s a reminder that Jesus himself gave up more than we can imagine for a life, and a terrible death, among us. It invites us into his kind of humility and sacrifice and giving of self, which can play out in any number of ways in the

life of someone who follows him. You could also think of “taking up the cross” as carrying with you a token of Jesus’ love for you.

This whole conversation, it seems to me, is suffused with love. The rich man comes wanting to know how he can get into heaven (clearly wanting some kind of entry code), and Jesus looks at him with love, as he invites him to a journey of faith and service. The man isn’t ready to get rid of the all stuff that’s holding him back, so he goes sadly away. We can’t know whether he ever changed his mind, whether he ever came back. What we do know is that Jesus loved him, and we can be sure that didn’t change. Wherever that man’s journey took him, Jesus’ love went with him. And that, my friends, is a gift we can take with us, too. Amen.

Resources:

Without Oars, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson.