

Pilgrim Life-Discipleship as Pilgrimage - Melody Neufeld - July 26 2015 at OMC

(slide one) The image of pilgrimage was strong in the Hebrew Bible. The pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem three times per year was mandated by God to the people of Israel. For some Abraham is seen as the Jewish patriarch who began the concept of a pilgrimage journey for Jews when he responded to God's call to leave Ur and start a new life in a place that God would show him (Gen 12:1). In the New Testament there is a story of Jesus and his parents going to Jerusalem as was prescribed by the Torah.

Slide 2 The Psalmist encourages us with these words "Blessed are those whose strength is in You, whose heart is set on pilgrimage". We know that the writer of the Psalm is speaking of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem where God dwelt in and above the temple. Yet it also speaks of the heart of what a pilgrimage is; an intentional spiritual journey to follow the one true god.

(slide 3) Jesus describes himself as The way or the Road, the truth and the life. Jim Forrest states "whether the journey is within your own backyard or takes you to the other side of the world, the potential is there for the greatest of adventures: a journey not only toward Christ but with him" (p.xvii). Jerome, one of the early church fathers, encouraged Christians to go on pilgrimage to see relics or holy sites however it was not necessary for salvation. Gregory of Nyssa, bishop of Nyssa, wrote a powerful attack on the practice of pilgrimage in the late 4th century. Gregory's view was what really mattered in spiritual terms was what was happening in a person's heart and not the places which he or she happened to visit. St. Augustine agreed "God is everywhere, it is true, and He that made all things is not captured or confined to dwell in any place" (7). Thomas a Kempis, a 5th century mystic declared that really no matter where the Christian would lodge they would always be a stranger and pilgrim incapable of finding peace until unified inwardly with Christ. To Thomas, Jesus was the living shrine and the inner journey the path of the Spirit. For Medieval pilgrims there was a preparation to take a pilgrimage. First the pilgrim needed to get permission to leave home from the church or other authority. These documents proved to the leaders in other parts of the land that the pilgrim was on a legitimate purposely journey and was not an outlaw or a spy. Ignatious of Loyola a Catholic priest 1500's in his Spiritual Exercises held the idea that pilgrimage could be in the imagination, a meditative journey. John Calvin, an influential French theologian and pastor during the Reformation referred to the life of the Christian as a pilgrimage. John Bunyan picked up the this theme in his book Pilgrim's Progress. As a pilgrim the Christian life is orientated to its destination, another kingdom, rather than for its own sake, with intention to follow Jesus. Graham Tomlin in his article Protestants and Pilgrimage suggests that the pilgrim metaphor could be useful in this post Christendom age for the Church. The culture today which sees no real direction for the future and may even celebrate aimless wandering, would benefit from imagery which is a reminder of its true calling to live in hope and anticipation rather than complacency and contentment.

(slide 4) Richard Neibour, a 20th century Christian theological ethicist describes pilgrims as "persons in motion-passing through territories not there own seeking something we might call contemplation or perhaps clarity, a goal to which only the Spirit's compass points the way.

(slide 5) Dorothy Day was an American journalist, social activist and devout Catholic who worked to establish the Catholic Worker Movement, a pacifist movement that continues to combine direct aid of the poor and homeless with nonviolent direct action on their behalf. Dorothy's interpretation of pilgrimage "every day of one's life and all that happened along the way, planned or unexpected, were segments of a heavenward pilgrimage, so long as the guiding principle was to live the gospel and to discover Christ in those whom one encountered. Pilgrimage for Dorothy was a way of life, a mode of listening, an attitude that motivated choices, a discipline of being" (p.xiii).

(slide 6) The crucial thing for the persons of faith mentioned in the Bible and for us is that they had to leave what was comfortable. They had to leave home. The heroic journey for our ancestors, according to Hebrews 11, involved becoming "foreigners and exiles on the earth." From Abraham, who left home when he was called by God to go to a land that he would be shown, to the disciples along the Sea of Galilee who responded to the call of Jesus to "Follow me," there is a leaving, a going out, a separation from what is comfortable and known in order to move into the unknown, the unimaginable. Tolkien writes "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to". You're not a pilgrim if you stay where you

are” Whether in Saskatoon or Osler or walking through the hills. The daily goal for the pilgrim is seeking the kingdom of God, movement.

(slide 7) Mary Oliver’s poem The Journey speaks of the challenges of the call of the pilgrim. “One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice--though the whole house began to tremble and you felt the old tug at your ankles. “mend my life!” each voice cried. But you didn’t stop.

(slide 8) You knew what you had to do, though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations, though their melancholy was terrible. It was already late enough, and a wild night, and the road full of fallen branches and stones.

(slide 9) But little by little, as you left their voices behind, the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds, and there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own, that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing you could do-- determined to save the only life you could save.”

(slide 10) “We are on pilgrimage, not in permanent quarters. We serve a Lord who for the joy set before him went forward to the Cross, despising the shame. If we would follow him,, we must press on, not slacking, not accepting any concordat with the world, not looking for ease or security, but seeking only to offer him new obedience day by day until he comes.” -Lesslie Newbigin, sermon preached at Riverside Church, May 25 1960, cited in A Word in Season, p. 6.

(slide 11) The Way of St. James otherwise known as the Camino de Santiago de Compostela is one of the three best known Christian pilgrimages. The other two are to Rome and Jerusalem. The 500 mile pilgrimage to Santiago in northwest Spain emerged as a principle destination in Western Christendom during the Middle Ages. The Way of St James from France to the west coast of Galicia in Spain was difficult and dangerous and for some this may have intensified the appeal to those who thought the precarious journey as commendable. The cathedral in Santiago, legend says is the home of the body of St. James, son of Zebedee and disciple of Jesus. Millions of pilgrims of all descriptions have travelled the pilgrimage to Santiago from ancient days until today. Arriving at the cathedral in Santiago is emotionally overwhelming. The cathedral took 100 years to complete and was designed to impress with light streaming down giving an ethereal not of this world feeling. For those who enter there is a feeling of the presence of something holy. Thousands of pilgrims crowd into the cathedral at the end of the journey. The cathedral also has the worlds largest incense burner which can be swung by 4 men manning the ropes. One of the functions it had in the early centuries was to fumigate the stench of the many pilgrims. Today it is an event for people finishing the pilgrimage. Over the centuries the scallop shell has taken on meaning for this pilgrimage. The grooves in the shell, which come together at a single point, represent the various routes pilgrims traveled, eventually arriving at a single destination: the tomb of Saint James in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The scallop shell is also a symbol for the individual pilgrim. As the waves of the ocean wash scallop shells up on the shores of Galicia, God's hand also guided the pilgrims to Santiago. The scallop shell also served practical purposes for pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago. The shell was the right size for gathering water or for eating out of as a makeshift bowl. Also, because the scallop shell is native to the shores of Galicia, the shell functioned as proof of completion. By having a scallop shell, a pilgrim could almost certainly prove that he or she had finished the pilgrimage and had actually seen the edge of the known world.

I would like to share with you the lessons that I learned from my pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago :

- 1) pay attention to angels
- 2) go 1 horizontal daily
- 3) set aside fears
- 4) laugh often, don’t take yourself too seriously
- 5) you are not alone on the journey (slide 12)

Lesson One: Pay attention to angels. On the Camino I experienced less outside interference and become more attentive to seeing and listening for unexpected messages from angels. My trail angels were named Marie France and Claude. Marie Franz and her husband Phillipe had started the trail in France and I met them in Terradilles de Templarios Spain on day five. Marie Franz spoke very limited English and I speak no French however there was a bond from our first encounter at the albergue. You must know that meeting someone on the trail or at an albergue, the pilgrim hostel, might mean a one time encounter-you likely would not see them again., I kept meeting Marie Franz. I left my sunglasses

behind in a restaurant one day and only noticed when a significant distance was covered. Marie Franz had coffee in that same restaurant noticed the glasses there on the table and carried them with her for two days not knowing if she would meet me again. We did meet and I was overwhelmed by her thoughtfulness. Then, there were other chance meetings, I was walking through a village and heard my name "Melodee!", it was her popping her head out of a store. I was walking down a road and heard my name "Melodee!", it was her on the ridge above me. After several other similar encounters, I began to realize that God was playfully calling to me through his angel Marie Franz. At the end of the journey in Santiago it was a most treasured blessing to meet her one more time just before they left on the train back to France. I babbled away to her telling her she was my trail angel, that she gave me encouragement, and caused me to laugh, to become more open and helped to release the burdens I carried. Although language was not shared, the Spirit was. Another angel encounter was at an albergue where pilgrims stayed. The hostel was in a run down village where the view was amazing into the valley. When the door to the hostel opened I noted an English sign (which was unusual) that advertised massages and Reiki treatments. I was sold. I was experiencing some very tired shoulders from carrying my 20 lb pack and was very interested in having a massage. The therapist Claude, began to work on my shoulders. Within minutes he became philosophical. "Do you like yourself?" he asked me. "Most of the time." I replied. "You do a lot for other people and less for yourself. You are carrying their burdens. Your neck and shoulders tell me this" he continued. He proceeded to give me a message of setting down fears as the angels of the Bible often did. He spoke of freedom and allowing people to have their own journey. Claude did not know me but Jesus used his words to speak truth to me. I classify Claude as an angel-a messenger. Another encounter with a message of an angel was where I was a witness. My friend was walking ahead of me through a village. An older woman was standing on her porch and she began speaking to my friend in Spanish. He stopped, listened, nodded and kept walking. When she was finished she immediately turned and went back into her home. Not paying any attention to me. I asked my friend what she had said to him. My friend told me that she had said that there was a Supermercado, a supermarket, in the next village and not to worry. He had not asked for this information-we were just walking through the town. However, for my friend, this information would be extremely important. A grocery store would be the first thing he would look for in the villages. It was important to get nourishment to replenish from the day and to stock up for the next day. My friend always thought ahead about these things. How did she know to say this to him? I believe Jesus knew his need and sent him a messenger in the guise of an older woman in a small village in northern Spain. Unimaginable. Jesus speaks to us through any means he chooses, trail angels, massage therapists in run down places, women who have messages just for reassurance. One does not have to leave their country, family or friends for these encounters to occur. They are happening in our daily life. Pay attention to angels.

Lesson Two: "Get horizontal" for at least 30 minutes per day. The number of kilometers walked on the Camino varied from day to day from between fourteen to thirty. After walking all day we usually arrived at our destination by late afternoon. Finding my bunk, laying out my sleeping bag, taking off my shoes and going horizontal for thirty minutes, my eyes closed, became my daily practice. This thirty minute time of physical relaxation became a time of letting go of the day, a time of contemplation and centering prayer. On the trail there is little getting away from your thoughts or from the physical process of taking one step after another. John Hitt describes the long walk on the ancient road to Santiago as a time of losing his mind not in the psychiatric sense but in the sense of just not needing it. The trail is physically and emotionally exhausting. At the end of the day it was important to set it all down and enter into a contemplative mind. The lesson to 'go horizontal' is to sit in contemplative silence for thirty minutes daily. It is taking in the realization that we are perfectly accepted, perfectly loved and need do nothing to earn these gifts. The prayer of quiet, of self surrender is captured in the words contemplative prayer. It is this type of surrender, when no words are offered up, that invades, touches, and heals the deep places of the unconscious. This is where the garbage of our lives lie and this is where God hides and reveals. We surrender to the attraction to be still, to be loved, just to be." As contemplation is practiced over months, years, decades there is movement from the Spirit; transformation occurs slowly within us and there is a letting go of self. Because of the acceptance of the love of God our actions have a different focus, suffering is no longer feared, our journey takes on a life of freedom. Go horizontal for 30 minutes.

Lesson Three: Set fears to one side. On day four of my journey on the Camino the route went along a small river. The walk was lovely except for the black flies. Just before we left the river path I noticed a shepherd with a group of 25-30 sheep on the opposite bank. The shepherd had stopped on the path and was talking with a friend. I was particularly taken with the sheep who were bunched up behind the shepherd waiting patiently for him to lead them to green pastures. They trusted the shepherd to lead, they did not jump ahead or push past him. They had no fear because the

shepherd was there. Psalm 23 speaks of the Lord being our shepherd, and because of this we are not wanting. And yet we are fearful. James Forest names this age as one of pandemic fear. He speaks of fears such as violence, war, environmental destruction, loss of jobs, poverty, illness, death, neighbours, strangers, lunatics. From morning till night we are bombarded with fear stimulating stories that stifle our imagination and limit our dreams and visions. We cling to the gods of this world, consumption, war, politics, sex, technology to free us from these fears. They are unable to do so. The one true God reminds us to “do not fear”. From Genesis to Revelation messengers of God remind us to not fear. God’s perfect love casts out fear. Richard Rohr describes the fears that assault us as persons who are not in fear of physical danger, as mostly simple anxieties about social skills, about intimacy, about likeableness, or about performance. We need not give emotional food or charge to these fears or become attached to them. We don’t even have to shame ourselves for having these fears. Simply ask your fears, “What are you trying to teach me?” The truth is Jesus has conquered death itself. We have nothing to fear.

Lesson Four: The journey is long, laugh often, don’t take yourself too seriously. When I think of laughter on the Camino, I think of Cindy. Cindy was a pilgrim from the United States who was an example to me of making the Camino her own. She described herself as a ‘plodder’ taking her time, not being seduced by others who were speeding by. I met Cindy several times at various hostels she was not the life of the party however she had the best stories and we shared very hearty laughter. Cindy simply refused to take herself too seriously. Cindy had the gift of knowing that she was not particularly special for being on the Camino or for walking hundreds of kilometers. She saw all pilgrims as special. She was resolved to live enthusiastically and believe that life itself is a miracle. Her stories were ones which spoke of the amazing strength of others she had met, or the warm welcome she had received at a particular hostel or the fact that she took a night or two and stayed in a four star hotel. She brought me back to the moment by telling me stories of co-ed hostels and snoring pilgrims. If there is healing power in laughter, Cindy was a laughter practitioner. Followers of Jesus joyfully travel lightly with limited baggage or trappings and may be looked upon as strange. Followers of Jesus will eagerly go to the margins of society to listen, to learn and to share Jesus’ love and life and may be thought of as odd. Followers of Jesus are joyfully no longer in step with the surrounding society and those who are faithful will have limited places to dwell. The journey is long, laugh often don’t take yourself too seriously.

Lesson Five: You are not alone on the journey. There were some days when we did not see other people for hours and hours on the trail. Even when walking with a friend there were times when we were in our own solitude. When passing another pilgrim or being passed by another the greeting “Buen Camino” was shared. It was a blessing that we gave each other, Buen Camino-good journey. In the evening at the hostels there was a coming together, a communion of pilgrims sharing a meal, sharing a dormitory style room, sharing the unspoken experience of engaging with wind, sun and rain throughout the day, sharing blister healing information, sharing the journey. In the morning we would part not knowing if we would see each other again. Each person on their own individual journey within the greater pilgrimage known as the Camino de Santiago. Pilgrims have been walking the Way of St. James for hundreds of years. There was a strong feeling of the spirit of millions of others who had walked the trail before. We are also not alone on this journey because Jesus walks with us.

slide 17) Jesus has given us the gift of his church for us to walk with others. Martin Robinson compares pilgrimage and the mission of the church. "Pilgrimage can be understood as a motif that stands for mission as a journey of faith." (p.170). The imagination of the Church, states Robinson, is best engaged when pilgrimage or journey lies near its centre. He describes pilgrimage in regards to the body of Christ as the breathing in of the Church.

(slide 18) Together on our journey we are formed and transformed by God who loves us more than we can ask or imagine. Inhale. Being on a this journey includes movement,creativity and discovery. The breathing out of the Church body is its mission of sending out of its members into the world to share God's love. Exhale. This mission is not without risks. It is this calling, that causes us to have no real home and describes our life of following Jesus as one of permanently being on a journey.

(slide 19) “When it’s over, I want to say: all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. When it is over, I don’t want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real. I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument. I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.”

(slide 20) Our life as pilgrims mean that we are moving forward, step by step, poco a poco in our walk with Jesus. We do not need to keep step with the world around us. Some may call us 'plodders', some may consider us reckless, some may care about our individual journey, most will not. Yet there may be certain pilgrims with whom we can walk with for awhile sharing dreams and visions of God's kingdom as our state of permanent daily pilgrimage continues in our lives. I end with a prayer from Mary Batchelor

"God of the nomad and the pilgrim, may we find our security in you and not in our possessions. May our homes be open to guests and our hearts to one another so that all our traveling is lighter and together we reach the goal" Whether we are in a distant land or in our common places, we as followers of Jesus are on a pilgrim journey. May we know that Jesus walks with us as he is the way, the truth, the life. amen.