

Our Spiritual Pilgrimage

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Pilgrimage in its truest sense is religiously motivated travel for the purpose of meeting and experiencing God with hopes of being shaped and changed by that encounter. —Arthur Paul Boers, The Way is Made by Walking

Ancient Witness: Hebrews 12:1-2

At my last church in the Chicago area, a group of us went to Nicaragua for a week one February. We busily got our immunizations and our passports up to date and our airline tickets. We met together and prepared ourselves physically, emotionally and spiritually.

We had a mission partner down there called Fabretto, named after a Catholic priest who devoted himself to helping orphans and the poor. But this was not a typical church mission trip designed to work and help the people. Although that is good to do, that wasn't what we were doing.

The purpose of that trip was to take a *spiritual pilgrimage*, which is kind of like a walking retreat. And so we walked back roads and trails for miles and experienced the country, the land and the people of these out-of-the-way villages in Nicaragua in order to be changed and transformed through these experiences.

And so a pilgrimage is a spiritual practice.

As a spiritual practice, it is one of the lesser-known and more obscure ones to modern Christians, especially those of us of the Protestant tradition. So in a way, we were recovering a spiritual practice that has been lost to most of us. (Meditation is another one that is being rediscovered in the church recently.) A pilgrimage is not about reaching a destination any more than the goal of dancing is to move to the other side of the dance floor. It's about the process.

Probably the most famous pilgrimage is found in a different religious tradition. Every year our Muslim brothers and sisters make the pilgrimage to Mecca that is seen as a mandatory duty to do at least once in one's lifetime, one of the five pillars of Islam. The Hajj is associated with the life of the prophet, Muhammad, may he be praised, from the seventh century. But the ritual of the pilgrimage to Mecca is considered by Muslims to stretch back thousands of years to Abraham.

Recently, there have been 2-3 million pilgrims, and each year the photos and images that we see are breath taking. It takes six days—walking about 40 kilometers from Miqat (starting place) to Arafat and then back to Mecca.

Malcolm X wrote this in his Autobiography when he took the pilgrimage in 1964 that he found transformative:

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to back-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white. Americans needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of my thought patterns previously held.

The book, *The Way is Made by Walking*, was written by Arthur Boers, who walked the famous 500 mile pilgrimage in Spain called the Camino de Santiago (the “road” or “path of St. James”).

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He makes the point, first, that a pilgrimage is a *demanding journey*. Destinations are often inconveniently located, difficult to reach. One is dislocated to an unfamiliar place, suspending regular responsibilities and routines. A pilgrimage requires a certain amount of sacrifice, costing time, money and effort. “If we do not enter a pilgrimage lightly or casually,” Boers writes, “we may be more likely to mean it and benefit from it.” They may be psychologically and spiritually taxing as well.

A pilgrimage is usually on a well-worn path, rooted in a history, a story and legacies of those we precede us. They are paths that are tried and true with blazes (trail markers) to help us find our way. And yet we also encounter surprises, risk and the unexpected.

In a way, you could say that every time we venture out to church—put on our gloves, boots and jacket, brave the cold—we make a small pilgrimage. We put our bodies in motion for the purpose of becoming more aware of the Sacred, of God, in our lives, and to be transformed and changed. It’s a spiritual practice that can’t be experienced simply by staying home listening to a podcast. And some have lamented that we really lost something from our weekly pilgrimage when we no longer walk to our worship services.

And so there’s the pilgrimage that is a specific act—a spiritual practice. But there is also pilgrimage in a more general, metaphorical sense.

The 40 days of Lent, which started this past Wednesday, is often seen as a spiritual pilgrimage. It is when we travel a strenuous, demanding journey along the well-worn path of tradition of prayer, fasting and reflection in preparation for the Easter experience.

In previous congregations I used to welcome people to worship by saying something like,

We are all on a spiritual journey, and we welcome you fellow pilgrims, fellow seekers, as you join us on this part of the path. It is a journey that never ends—none of us “arrives” in the sense that we know it all or have the answers. We continue to live with openness, with questions.

So the entire life of faith is a pilgrimage—it requires effort and life style changes, takes us out of our comfort zone. We encounter uncertainty and surprises. And it helps when we travel together in community. When we both give and receive help as it is needed. It is more about the journey itself than the destination. It is in the mundane, arduous, beautiful, painful, surprising, exhilarating, joyful and disappointing journey that the Divine Presence can be found. There is a real sense that we can all be pilgrims, whether or not we have ever been on a physical pilgrimage.

The outer journey of a pilgrimage reflects an inner journey of faith—a life long path that is intentional, demanding and focused on meeting and experiencing God, and require a certain exertion. The physical pilgrimage can help us along our inward journey and can teach us.

One of the observations that Boers made about the Camino de Santiago was the importance of traveling light. He started out with an overstuffed backpack, but after miles of walking he soon started to re-evaluate what he really needed, what was essential. Every ounce counted! And so he began discarding things along the way and recalled Thoreau's injunction: Simplify, simplify, simplify! Those things once thought to be precious and indispensable became a liability, an hindrance.

This reminds me of when I lived in Arizona, near the border with Mexico. There were times when we went out to the migrant trail with a group called Humane Borders to set out water barrels for the migrants as they attempted to cross the brutal Sonoran Desert to get to this county. Hundreds perish each year as they succumb to the heat and exhaustion. And along the way, we collected what we called "holy trash," items discarded along the way by the travelers. These were things that they had carried for hundreds of miles in the desert but no longer had the strength to carry. They were precious items of people who already had precious little: a family Bible, a child's sweater, a toy, family photographs, a baby's blanket—holy, precious things. Holy trash.

And so part of the spiritual pilgrimage is to learn to simplify, travel light, lighten our load. One becomes vulnerable and open. This is not an easy, trivial thing to learn. As Pearl Buck said, "All birth is unwilling."

We learn to let go of our attachments—those things we think we need to be happy. And we learn that a life without attachment, as the Buddha said, is a life of freedom and peace, of true happiness and liberation from suffering. Attachments such as success or approval of others or financial security, hold us down and prevent us from realizing, as Paul said, that we only really need one thing: God's grace is sufficient. We can drop everything else along the way and discover the abiding love and presence of the Holy.

The paradox of the pilgrimage is that it can help us understand that there is no place we have to go and nothing we need to do. As Scott Russell Sanders said,

Pilgrims often journey to the ends of the earth in search of holy ground, only to find that they have never walked on anything else.

And so as pilgrims and seekers, may we walk the path of faith with diligence and discipline, to discover the presence and love that has been with us all along.