

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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The Pilgrim Way

He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts.” – Mark 6:7-13

Summertime is a time when many of us travel, whether it be to distant lands, or to places where we go every summer. But there is a different form of travel, the spiritual journey called a pilgrimage that we should also know about, and pilgrimages can be undertaken in many ways, even without leaving the confines of your own chair.

There is a story about three Irish monks who in the ninth century, set out in small boats across the Irish Sea, without oars or sails. (think about that for a moment – no method of propulsion! They were at the mercy of the wind and the waves – what an act of faith and trust!) They came ashore in Cornwall, England, and were brought to the court of King Alfred. When he asked them where they had come from and where they were going they answered that they had departed “because we wanted for the love of God to be on pilgrimage, we cared not where.” [from Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, p. 2]

In her book *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, Esther de Waal writes that the pilgrimage or spiritual journey is a central motif in Celtic spirituality, but that the word “pilgrimage” itself may be misleading, since it implies a journey to somewhere. But as in that story, when the Celts thought about a spiritual journey, they did not think of a destination or goal that can be reached so that the journey could be completed. The journey was not just aimless wandering, though. Pilgrims sought rather to undertake an inner journey, a journey into the heart of God, by becoming what the Celts call “guests of the world.” The experience of being away from the place of comfort, away from the comforts of home, of being dependent

on the kindness of strangers was a means of rooting out from heart and mind all of one's own aims and desires, so that God's will could have room to grow. By creating a home for God in our inner life, the pilgrimage opens the way to our true home, the "haven of resurrection."

The passage that we heard from Mark's gospel has a similar journey. Jesus sends out the twelve apostles in pairs to teach and to heal. They are to take nothing with them, not bread or money or a change of clothes. They are to be "guests of the world," dependent on the hospitality of those to whom they go.

There is also no destination, only a mission. Whatever town they go to they are to challenge the "evil opposition," the forces of oppression that contribute to conflict, poverty and illness. They are to "preach with joyful urgency that life can be radically different" as Eugene Peterson paraphrases the passage.

St. Columba was one of the most famous of the Celtic pilgrims. He was an Irish nobleman who left his beloved homeland in the year 563 and founded a monastery on the Scottish Island of Iona. In a poem that expresses his sadness at being away from Derry, the Irish county that was his home, St. Columba laments the loss of his family and friends, the land, the trees, and the angels whose presence he felt in his homeland. He speaks of his heart being broken in four, but he also believes that God called him forth, like Abraham and the ancient disciples, to walk a strange road.

The monastery that Columba founded on Iona was a centre of learning and missionary activity in Europe for centuries. At its height it had more than 800 monks in residence! But nothing lasts forever, and eventually, after Henry VIII dissolved British monasteries, the buildings fell into ruins. In 1938, a Scotch minister named George MacLeod decided to undertake a different kind of pilgrimage. He had a vision of bringing together unemployed labourers and young ministers to work together. MacLeod believed that the mostly middle class ministers were poorly

equipped for ministry with working class people. So while they rebuilt the residence buildings, the ministers and the labourers learned to talk to each other. The bridges built between classes led to the formation of an ecumenical community dedicated to building bridges between denominations. The Iona Community was also devoted to the struggle for justice, peace and the integrity of creation, action in relation to racism and inter-faith concerns, work with young people, and the rediscovery of spirituality for today. Today the Iona Community has 200 members, 900 associates and 2000 friends, male and female, lay and ordained, who live in many countries, but are committed to the vision of Iona. The community offers week-long programs for youth and adults and more than 100,000 people visit every year. Therese and I spent a week there in 2015. The monastery is now a place where people intentionally undertake an inner journey, seeking the vision of God for their lives and their societies.

For all their enthusiasm for journeys, the Celts also knew that it is the inner journey that is most important. A hermit is said to have told Saint Samthann of Clonbroney that he wanted to look for God in foreign lands. The saint replied “Were God to be found overseas, I too would take ship and go. But since God is near to all that call upon him, there is no constraint upon us to seek him overseas. For from every land there is a way to the kingdom of heaven.” [quoted in de Waal, p. 3]

For us today, it is easy to travel. It is expensive, but for those with the money, it is possible to cross continents and oceans in only a few hours. But as former UN Secretary General Dag Hammerskjold once wrote, “the longest journey is the journey inward.” The most difficult journey is that in which we set aside our own agenda and dedicate ourselves to God’s will and way. It is so easy to deceive ourselves that what we want is what God wants, that God wants nothing more than our comfort and security. Celtic Spirituality on the other hand, the legacy of St. Columba and his colleagues, calls us to seek a new relationship with creation, with the poor and downtrodden of the earth, and with the Trinity of love, that

in all things we may walk in the Way of Jesus, who himself set out from his home and had no place to lay his head.