

THE PILGRIM'S JOURNEY

It is vacation time for many people. Many of us and many of our friends are going places. No matter where we are, at this time of year – even if we already live in one of the garden spots of the world – some of us are determined to go somewhere else. So it is interesting to contemplate the many different kinds of trips that humans like to take. We could even become philosophical and speak of all of life as a journey. Humans find many roads to travel: paths of honor and paths of degradation; journeys into one occupation or another; roads that lead to wealth and fame; others that lead to sacrifice and service; many that lead nowhere in particular but which may be scenic or enjoyable at moments, nonetheless.

In any case, most humans are inveterate travelers – always in motion; always on some kind of quest, whether we think of it in such terms or not. It goes all the way from the “wanderlust” of poetry and song, to the well-planned and purposeful trek to a new land or a new home. It goes from the lonesome appeal of the freight train in the night, to the prearranged vacation trip of an earnest tourist. There are adventurers seeking excitement and danger, and there are refugees fleeing from danger and abuse.

Some people travel for a living – like merchants or salesmen. Some people travel for knowledge – like professors of history or anthropology or archaeology. Some people travel for religious enlightenment, in what we call a pilgrimage – to Palestine or Mecca or some religious shrine. Some people travel to visit people they love, and some people travel because they enjoy seeing new sights.

It is generally agreed that travel can be of great benefit – “educational,” we say. New sights, new people, new customs and traditions broaden perspective. The point may hold true whether we speak of traveling to a new country, into outer space, into a new field of knowledge, or even into some new task or relationship. But not all travel is good, and some trips are not purposeful or beneficial.

Travel is one of the foremost techniques of escapism. There is also a coward's flight, and there is the aimless wandering of “lostness” itself. There is the “primrose path” to perdition, and in our time we even speak of a new kind of “trip” induced by drugs.

Seeing life as an assortment of various kinds of journeys raises a couple of interesting questions for us. What journey am I on at this present time? And how many journeys will a person have time to take in one ordinary lifetime?

The younger the person, the more likely they are to assume that they will have plenty of time to take all the journeys they want to take. That is never true, of course. One of the big surprises for lots of us is the discovery that some of the best journeys require so much time and focus that they rule out many of the other journeys we might like to take. We could talk about the Vermont farmer who knows every foot of his land and all the creatures that dwell on it for miles around – and compare that to the world traveler who has spent time in every major country of the world. We could talk about the difference between traveling through the first five years of marriage six times – and traveling through the first thirty years of marriage once. Not the same journey. We could ponder the problem of how we sometimes travel great distances but seem to see very little and to learn even less. “Live and learn,” we say – hopefully. But sometimes we live for long periods without seeming to learn very much, and some of us even admit that there are periods when we just seem to go around in circles.

Life is filled with such choices, and the very first thing we must face squarely, if we want to talk about the spiritual quest – the Pilgrim's Journey – is the fact, the great and terrible and wonderful fact, that the Pilgrim's Journey can only be traveled by trading all our other desires and distractions for a chance to go with the Holy Spirit. It is, as Jesus told us, like the pearl of great price, which can only be bought by selling *all that we have*. Anybody can buy the great pearl. It is available for everyone. But the price is always the same for anyone: for each and every one of us, the price is *all that we have*.

Paul tells us that this was, in fact, his own experience. I sometimes ponder what it must have been like for this young and obviously very promising rabbi to deal with his experience on the Damascus Road. Clearly his friends and relatives, his parents, his colleagues in rabbinical school, Gamaliel his teacher (one of the great rabbis of all time) – all of them would have been proud of Paul on the road he was already traveling. They would have seen life from the perspective of the Judaism of his time – a Judaism that considered Jesus, if they thought of Him much at all, to be an impetuous, untrained disgrace to true faith in God. Imagine claiming that the

subjective hunches of individuals at prayer might be more important – more authoritative – than the traditions, the commandments, the heritage of authentic Judaism! Paul had become concerned for the damage this new cult was doing, so he had become more active than most of his friends in countering the claims and aberrations of Jesus' followers.

But then he himself encounters this resurrected Jesus. Can we imagine the turmoil? What does it cost Paul? All his plans for earthly prominence and success. The approval and admiration of everybody he has ever cared about. His own belief system, and all the ways in which that has made him feel valuable and important in his own eyes. Years of study and preparation for his life as a rabbi.

But years later, Paul makes one of his most remarkable statements: *“All such assets I have written off because of Christ. More than that, I count everything sheer loss, far outweighed by the gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I did in fact forfeit everything. I count it so much rubbish, for the sake of gaining Christ and finding myself in union with him, with no righteousness of my own based on the law, nothing but the righteousness which comes from faith in Christ, given by God in response to faith.”* (Philippians 3:7-9)

There we see it again: Paul has traveled from a code of outer behavior to an inner relationship with the Holy Spirit.

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Almost everything we know about the life of Jesus took place on a strip of land one hundred miles long and thirty miles wide. That is, the one who calls us to the Pilgrim's Journey never went as far in His whole lifetime as many of us do in a single week. Yet our minds are far more earth-locked than His was. If it was Abraham calling us to go with him from Babylon to Canaan; if it was Moses asking us to follow him out of slavery in Egypt; if it was Nehemiah begging us to go back to Jerusalem to build the temple – well, those kinds of journeys seem clearer and more important to most of us. But this spiritual migration that Christians are supposed to be on with Jesus – this Pilgrim's Journey of “let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also” (from Martin Luther's “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”) – how is a human being to understand *that* kind of thing when it does not really seem to be going anywhere?

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It is no wonder that so many of us duck and dodge the Pilgrim's Journey for as long as we can. This trip goes from here to eternity. There are no round-trip tickets. This is not a vacation. We never come back to where we began. Nobody has to take this trip if they do not want to. But there is no way to "sort of try it out to see if we like it." Lots of offers and opportunities claim they can do this for us, but they are all counterfeit offers – a charlatan's brew. They never get us on the real Journey. They do not cost us all that we have, but neither do they give us the real pearl.

We have tried every way in the world to duck and dodge the real surrender. We have called to witness against this true allegiance every form of excuse and reason – every evidence of social necessity and environmental reality. We have done that because this Pilgrim's Journey has us terribly baffled. We see ourselves as part of the Pilgrim band because somehow we know this is what it means to be a Christian. On the other hand, we want to stay reasonably warm and safe.

Jesus tells us to count the cost of following Him before agreeing to go on the Journey. People who do that honestly know that the cost can be high indeed: all that we have.

Back to Paul's awareness of the journey for a moment – for truly, he did not create the journey, but he *was* on it. Yet even as he writes, the nature of that journey is revealed: *"Not that I have already obtained this journey's end I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on ..."* Indeed he did.

Toward what is Paul straining and pressing on, without regret for what he has lost – without a word about all he has accomplished in the twenty-five years he has spent on the Pilgrim's Journey already? Please forgive me if I suggest a contrast between this veteran saint's awareness of how far he still has to go – and the frequent attitude of our own time that there is really very little more that God could possibly ask or expect of us.

Paul presses on because Jesus is both his Savior and his Lord. He is the Savior who gives LIFE – who saves by the unmerited gift of eternal, unlimited LOVE. He is also Lord – the one to be obeyed without exception because He also leads those who will follow into the fullness of the true Life they have been given.

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Paul does not yet find in himself the quality of love and forgiveness and oneness with God that he sees and feels in the life of Jesus. He borrows from it and lives off of it; he trusts it and counts on it and calls on it to illumine his Path and to guide his choices. But he is not yet the true Paul – not the essence of the Life he feels and senses deep within him. It is the grace of the Holy Spirit of Jesus that enables him to keep in touch with the eternal Life set before him. And that draws him on.

Meanwhile, Christ leads him on his journey – a journey that will one day bring him to fullness of Life with God. Then he will have obtained it. Then his life will be full and whole and merged with his own true nature. The English word is “sanctification.” We seldom use or comprehend such a word. In the meantime, Paul presses on. This is the Pilgrim’s Journey, and this is his goal.

“Finally, dear sisters and brothers, rejoice in the Lord.... Be glad you are Christians.” Paul does not see the Pilgrim’s Journey as any kind of punishment. He likes this Pilgrim’s Path – this Christian WAY. It is good to be wiping out the hatreds that he used to carry. It is good to be learning new dimensions of compassion and love. It is fun taking on new disciplines of commitment and dedication. It is freedom to find old attitudes challenged and melting under the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul likes going from faith to faith – from trust to even more trust. Situations that at one time would have made him quake in his boots are now just part of the journey. *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* (Philippians 4:13)

“Our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.” (Philippians 3:20)

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Too many words, already, but it would be misleading and inaccurate if we did not come at last to see that the Christian church is a band of people who travel the Pilgrim’s Journey. All modern theology to the contrary and notwithstanding, the destination of the Christian Life is still God’s Kingdom – as it was revealed in Jesus, Lord and Christ.

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Perhaps this sermon should be listed under the heading of a minority report. The general opinion in today's world seems to be that the Christian Pilgrimage can be taken in stride – just another journey tacked on to all the other journeys we are already taking. We can get to Heaven by just doing what comes naturally – doing the best we can and letting God automatically save us in the end. We can travel the Christian WAY with ease and keep all our other desires and goals and purposes. Somehow that is not the impression I get or the conviction I feel when I watch and listen to Jesus.

I do not believe it is possible to travel the Pilgrim's Journey without disrupting our normal lives. I do not believe it is possible to travel the Pilgrim's Journey as a tourist. I am convinced that this Journey is only open to those who want the great pearl badly enough to risk losing all the other goals and charms of this life in order to obtain it.

Truly it does not matter what I believe or what I am convinced about. Nobody can take this Journey for someone else, and nobody can take this Pilgrimage by merely watching another. So what do you think and believe about what Jesus tries to tell us? *“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”* (Matthew 13:45-46)

We hold back many things from each other. It is a temporal realm, and that matches our reality here. But if we hold back things from God, God simply waits for us to get serious – to want the connection enough to truly go for it. If you are God, you do not have to be in a hurry. If you are God, you do not have to settle for things that you know will not work.