

“To Be a Pilgrim”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
20<sup>th</sup> Saturday/Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25C) – 26 & 27 October 2019  
Psalm 84:1-6; II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

I just want some recognition that the first verse of the reading from Sirach gave me everything I needed to preach a sermon on stewardship, but I have resisted the temptation, and you’re welcome.

Instead, I’d like to consider the clever trap Jesus set, and no matter how many times we come across that clever trap, we always seem to brush against that tripwire and get caught. You see, the parable depicts two people, perhaps pilgrims who’ve travelled a great distance, praying at the Temple. The first, a Pharisee, somebody who knew scripture backward and forward and upside down, just bragged his guts out. “Thank you, God, for making me awesome. I’m so superior to everybody else. Unlike these other people, I do all the right things, and I never have to apologize, because I never make a mistake.”

The second man was a tax collector, somebody despised by just about everybody, because he helped collect taxes for the Romans and to help pad his pockets put a little extra on top of the charge. So he was a collaborator and a thief, and an easy dumping ground for people’s resentments, someone you could look at and think, “At least I’m better than him.” The tax collector, eyes cast to the ground, confessed his sin to God and begged for mercy. He knew he needed forgiveness and the grace to live differently. So he asked for it, humbly, knowing that he was speaking to the only possible source for that grace.

Of course, we know the moral of the story. God liked the tax collector’s prayer much more than the Pharisee’s prayer, and we agree wholeheartedly, because check out the ego on that guy. The Temple was a huge place, but one does have to wonder how the Pharisee got his big

head through the gate? And then snap goes the trap, just like that, because we've just judged him. Isn't Jesus sneaky? Over and over again, the temptation proves too great, and we become like the Pharisee.

On the basis of a single prayer, we've categorized the Pharisee as a narcissistic, arrogant person devoid of all compassion, who never helped a soul unless it benefited him as well, and maybe he was that way. But even if what we deduce about him through his prayer is 100% right, our judgment is 100% wrong, because in our judgment, we become just as proud as the Pharisee we despise.

Someone like that needs our compassion and our prayers, because if the prayer reflects the man, he thinks the pilgrimage of faith is over, that he's arrived at the final destination, and that's heart-breaking. It's heart-breaking, the idea that life's most precious journey is over and there's nowhere left to go, nothing new left to explore and experience.

I suppose there's some measure of security in that perspective, the satisfaction of a job well done, but where's the excitement? Where's the anticipation? Where's the joy of the wise pilgrim who knows that every destination is actually a waypoint that leads us farther along the road into fresh adventures, into deeper communion with the mystery we call God?

Certainly, the composer of Psalm 84 felt that energy, and I call him a composer instead of an author, because the Psalms were written to be sung. The composer celebrated both journey and arrival as one fluid process. You can see that in his verb tenses. They keep switching from present to past to future. "My soul has a desire and longing," for the future while simultaneously "the sparrow has found her a house . . . by the side of your altars." "They will climb. God will reveal." "Happy are the people whose strength is in you; whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way." It's a little confusing. Everything seems to be happening all at once, as if cause and effect

have broken down and blended together, and that is exactly the point. The Psalmist captures the essence of what it means to be a pilgrim, a pilgrim on the way of faith.

It's about reaching and seeking in equal measure. It's just as much about the journey as the destination. The pursuit equals if not exceeds the joy of the actual receiving what you desire. It's like finishing a really good book and feeling sad, until you realize there's a sequel. It's like making it someplace you've always wanted to be, like the Holy Land or Rome maybe, and feeling a little disappointed once you've gotten there. It's wonderful, maybe even transformative, but it doesn't complete you in the way that you might have hoped. But if you're praying and paying careful attention, you'll find the clue, the next link in the treasure hunt, that will send you once again on the pilgrim way.

Now part of us doesn't like the idea of faith being a constant journey. It sounds exhausting, and sometimes, it is. We'd like to nestle next to the sacred and just soak it up in peace, and there's nothing wrong with taking a pause. But settling down for any length of time, being satisfied by having made it this far, is a risky, because that sense of contentment can easily become complacency and that inches us ever closer to being that Pharisee, who was so self-satisfied. He thought he'd made it, but was so far off, he couldn't begin to fathom how far he had go. He couldn't envision the wonders awaiting him on the pilgrim's path.

The sacred presence, the mystery we seek, doesn't settle down. As the Bible clearly reveals, God is restless. Jesus rarely stayed anyplace for long. He was always on the move, and Paul followed this pilgrim path, driven because he had been forgiven, because he wanted to share that good news of freedom and peace with everyone he met, and he wanted to meet everyone. Sometimes, Paul would stay in one place for several months – in one instance up to eighteen months – to found a church, or help heal a broken one, but his missionary journeys covered

thousands of miles, established dozens of churches communities, and Paul's pilgrimage took him to unexpected places – not just geographically, but in mind and spirit as well.

We know how far he came on the journey, this Pharisee with a license to kill Christians, whose pilgrimage began with a radical experience of the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. In very short order, Saul became Paul, and Paul became both traitor and troublemaker. His former peers, the people who gave Paul that license to kill, saw Paul as a heretic leading people astray, encouraging them to follow a false Messiah. And most the places he visited to proclaim the gospel found him very disruptive, a threat to their cherished way of life.

Eventually, his enemies closed in, and near the end of his life, Paul felt abandoned and deserted by his fellow disciples, though as we heard in II Timothy, he forgave them. He was trapped as a prisoner. So he wrote to Timothy, offering him guidance on how to stay on the pilgrim path, because knew he wouldn't be around much longer. He showed Timothy how to act as a leader and companion to others who chose that sacred adventure, even if it meant they never left home.

And reflecting back, Paul took comfort from God's faithfulness, which made him faithful enough to break down a lot of barriers between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, man and woman. Paul felt gratitude for God's strength, which gave him strength to endure great suffering and rescued him countless times from peril. He looked back on a wild pilgrimage with that sense of completeness, of wholeness which we all seek. And his sense of completeness, unlike the Pharisee in the Temple, was merited because Paul accounted this, near the end of his life, as purely a function of God's grace and mercy. As he confided to Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." I hope near the end of my life those words might be mine as well.

Paul expressed no regrets. He didn't wonder if perhaps he could have somehow been a better preacher, or more popular, or made it to more cities and towns. He'd planned to go all the way to Spain to share the Gospel, and being human, Paul probably felt some disappointment knowing that was not going to happen. But he was at peace, having served his purpose as an agent of God's love and mercy, as someone who encouraged thousands to step foot on a pilgrimage of joy and awe.

What about us? Now none of us here is Paul, and there is a part of me that's very, very grateful for that, but what about us? Part of the Christian pilgrimage is to look back on where you've been, and to appreciate where we are in this present moment, and look ahead to the adventures to come. At some point, the pilgrimage will end, and we might wonder, "Was I faithful? Was I kind and forgiving? Did I encourage others to follow the Way of Jesus?"

To be able to say "yes" to those questions when the time comes means being a fierce pilgrim on the path of faith, because each step on the journey brings us greater peace. It gives us wiser insight and the mercy of self-forgiveness. If there is one way we can all be like Paul, it is to look back on life as it ends and say with confidence in God's mercy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." So off you go, pilgrims. Off you go. Enjoy the journey, and seek God. Amen.

