

A People of Pilgrimage

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 16: 16-17; Luke 2: 42-51

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I. Introduction

A couple of years ago, you all gave me the great gift of some time away on sabbatical. I took a month of that to travel to Japan where I could continue some of my studies of *aikido* and the *shakuhachi*, and I had to write a report to the Lilly Foundation this month about that since they funded that project for me.

And so, I found myself this week going back over my journals that I wrote while I was on this trip, and I was struck by the number of times I referred to this trip to Japan as a pilgrimage and the very powerful sense I had in that process of stepping out of my normal day-to-day life and sort of disconnecting and putting myself in some holy space. Because a pilgrimage is at its root a journey that has spiritual significance. There are lots of different variants on it, but what is interesting is that virtually every faith tradition on the planet has some call to pilgrimage in it. Probably one of the most well-known pilgrimages is the pilgrimage to Mecca that is such a fundamental part of Islamic tradition. And we're ending this week a month-long reflection on Islam.

Some of that has been prompted by so much of the news that we see all the time that is so heavily dominated by stories of Islamic radicalism and the violence around that. And then, of course, that then also invites lots of commentary by presidential candidates as we are in the midst of a presidential election season. And in a world that feels like it is rapidly shrinking in terms of our connection with people in very different parts of the world, we as Christians understand the obligation that we have to understand our neighbors and to find where those connecting points are between our own tradition and our own understanding of God and understanding of our Muslim brothers and sisters.

We started off talking about our common Jewish, Christian, Muslim traditions as being all children of Abraham and people of the book. We followed that up with reflecting on our call to all of us to be a people of prayer. And then, last week we talked about our common call to generosity and social transformation. I'm going to end our time today talking about our call to pilgrimage.

II. Mecca

In Islam, the pilgrimage is called the *Hajj* and it is the fifth of the five sacred pillars of Islam and a command for all Muslims to travel at some point during their life to Mecca for a festival that is held at a particular period during the year. Mecca is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad, but more importantly in terms of this pilgrimage, it is the home of the Kaaba, which is a very ancient holy site that in Islamic tradition was built by Abraham. So, it was very, very old when Muhammad lived in Mecca. And at that point

in history, it had become the focus of pilgrimage for a lot of different faith traditions. It was a very polytheistic site. In the year 630, just a couple of years before Muhammad died, Muhammad's Muslim community had recaptured Mecca and they cleansed the Kaaba of all other idols that were from other religions and rededicated it to the worship of Allah. It's that holy site that is the focus of prayer when Muslims turn towards Mecca to pray and the focus of this pilgrimage.

Now pilgrimage is a very rich part of Jewish and Christian tradition as well. And you heard the words from Deuteronomy that call all faithful Jewish men to make a pilgrimage three times a year to the city of Jerusalem for the three great festivals there and that structured all of Jewish worship. So, Passover, Pentecost, Sukkot -- the three times when all of the Jewish community would come together and, therefore, also provides the structure for much of our narratives around Jesus' life and the birth of the early church. The crucifixion obviously happens when all the Jews are gathered for Passover that first feast, and Pentecost in our tradition happens when the Jews are gathered for Pentecost in Jerusalem after the resurrection. These festivals of pilgrimage are at the heart of our Jewish and our Christian traditions.

As early as the 2nd Century, we hear about Christians coming from around the Mediterranean world to visit the important sites in the life of Christ. And not too long after that, pilgrimages start developing at various places around the world where great saints have lived and died. The *Canterbury Tales* are a collection of stories that pilgrims are telling each other as they travel to the sacred site of Canterbury. In Roman Catholic tradition, there's a lot of very significant pilgrimage sites like the site in Lourdes in France where so many people travel to experience God's healing power.

Many of you know that our friends, Drema McAllister-Wilson and Pat House, over the course of the last couple of years have traveled the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, which is a very ancient pilgrimage across the North Coast of Spain. It's a 500-mile trek so it takes some time. Drema did that in one long summer, and Pat has done it in a couple of different chapters. But I would encourage you if you have the opportunity at some point to talk to both of them about what a compelling process it is to be on that kind of extended pilgrimage. We don't emphasize that much in Protestant tradition, unfortunately. I think it is an incredibly rich spiritual discipline and spiritual gift for us, the process of stepping out of our daily lives for some period of time and going outside of our normal circles of movement to a place in the world that is not our usual and is often weighty with spiritual significance. So, the whole process of carving out time and space to go do a pilgrimage is for many people a very, very transformative process.

Our church, however, has a lot of people who love to travel and so there are a lot of opportunities to do pilgrimages. And the first thing I want to suggest to you all is when you get a chance to travel, I would encourage you to do a little thinking about what places in the area where you are, are of spiritual significance that would be worth a special trip. Whenever my family travels, we find some place or several places that have some significant spiritual events that happened there. And so, pilgrimage is part

of our regular process of being on vacation, and that's an easy way to sort of start to incorporate a little bit of this process.

III. Metaphor

We also have this wonderful gift in our Great Hall of the labyrinth, and the labyrinth is to be a pilgrimage for people who can't go on pilgrimage. I don't know if you all understood that that was its origin, that it was a place where you can walk and take a spiritual journey right where you are. It's a wonderful resource and throughout the year we have people who make use of that in our church, and I would also offer that as a gift. A gift largely due to my friend, Dona Collary, who at my first year at Metropolitan Memorial encouraged me to put that in.

But as a church we also have had some history with pilgrimages. For example, one of my esteemed predecessors, Bruce Poynter, used to take people from our church periodically on pilgrimages to England to visit some of the places in John Wesley's story. That's a wonderful way to do a pilgrimage and steep ourselves in some of our rich history. And some of you have asked me recently whether or not it would be worth thinking about doing a pilgrimage of Metropolitan folks to the Holy Land at some point in the next couple of years. I've never been there and that might be a really rich opportunity for some of us to engage in. So, if you're interested in that, please let me know because there seems to be some growing interest and I pay attention to those things.

I think pilgrimage is a very rich opportunity for us to deepen our spiritual journeys through not necessarily a daily practice but a periodic practice of placing ourselves outside of our normal time and space to be open to where God is moving.

Pilgrimage is also, of course, a metaphor. It is noteworthy that the very earliest Christians did not call themselves Christians. They called themselves "followers of the way," the path, with again this sense of being on a journey to a place of deeper relationship with God. And from John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress onward, we have used the metaphor of pilgrimage to talk about our life of faith.

So, I want to do sort of a quick reorientation in the sermon because I want to touch on pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline in its actual sense, but also now I want to talk a little bit about pilgrimage as a metaphor. Because what pilgrimage as a metaphor means for us is that our journey to God is one that is constantly evolving and changing. One of the things about being on a pilgrimage is you find yourself in different places all the way along that journey and having to accommodate to different circumstances, and that's exactly what our life of faith is about. It is about being in a process of growing with God. Now there is some built-in tension to that metaphor because much of what we also value in our faith is it is a rock in the stormy life that is our world and there's a security to our faith that we often cling to. And so, it feels to me like we often find ourselves in this tension of clinging to this thing that we know and cherish and is eternal and being called to new ways of expressing and living that faith out.

In our church that happens in all kinds of ways, from as mundane as arguing about what our worship services should look like and do we have guitars and drums in the sanctuary because that's not the way we used to do it. So, there's this tension between our classic traditional forms of worship and newer forms of worship.

We also, of course, have meatier, weightier debates about how our faith gets lived out. So, our most heated debate as United Methodist as you all know right now is how welcoming we are to our LGBTQ neighbors. And we've got people in our church that are passionately on one side or the other. The ones on the more traditionalist, conservative side are arguing that God's words on homosexuality are inviolate and never changing, and those of us on the more progressive side arguing that those words need to be re-interpreted in different ways. And our church has had a history of these conflicts obviously. All the way through the Middle Ages, we were involved in various renewal movements, and then, of course, that culminates in the Reformation when we engage in some pretty violent theological conflicts with one another. We took up arms with Protestants killing Catholics and Catholics killing Protestants over how we understood where our faith was calling us.

Where I'm going with this obviously is that those same debates are deeply rooted in the Muslim community as well, where they have great fidelity to the words of God that are contained in the Qur'an and ongoing wrestling with how those words then get interpreted and lived out in a modern world.

In Muhammad's day, the words of the Qur'an, for example, around women were very progressive. Islam provided protections and rights to women that were nowhere else to be found in the Arab community. There were rights that had to do with recognizing the full personhood and spiritual equality of women and men, forbidding a common practice in that day of female infanticide. Islamic law emphasized the contractual nature of the marriage covenant and provided for the fact that the dowry that was paid for a woman in the wedding ceremony didn't go to her family but went to the woman herself. The Qur'an guarantees a woman's right of inheritance and her ability and legal right to manage her own property. All of those laws were very expansive in the world of the 7th Century Arabia.

The struggle is they are no longer progressive and expansive in a 21st Century world culture, and so our Islamic brothers and sisters find themselves locked in the same kind of violent debate that characterized our Reformation. And while we see on the media violence that is often aimed at Westerners, we all know that most of the violence that happens in the Middle East is Muslim-on-Muslim violence. It is people of the same faith community who understand where God is calling them in very dramatically different ways.

There are vast segments of the Muslim community who understand many of the strictures on the life of women to be very outdated. And Muhammad from the beginning of the Muslim community had women in great positions of authority and some of the greatest Islamic scholars in the early history of the Islamic movement were women

scholars. So, it makes the debate on women's education 1500 years later profoundly ironic. And we're so blessed to have Muslim voices like the young woman, Malala, who was shot a couple of years ago by a Taliban extremist in an attempt to silence her voice, a Muslim voice arguing for the right of women to be educated. She miraculously survived that assassination attempt and has gone on to be a very powerful voice on the public stage and a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. But she is a classic example of the struggle that is happening within the Muslim community as they try to figure out how to move into a more modern, more heterogeneous world.

IV. Conclusion

We have some wisdom to offer them on that and we have our prayers to offer them too as we all recognize that we are called to be on a journey together to seek, to be faithful to God's evolving call to us and God's eternal call to us, to build a world where peace and justice and love prevail, and where hate and violence are always a sign of our sinfulness and brokenness, and called to witness wherever we find it to the power of the Holy Spirit to enlarge our worldview and to teach us how to love one another.

Amen.