

A Spiritual Quest Pilgrimage

A reflection on entering into a 6-week Sabbatical.

John 14:1, 18-19, 25-27 Mark 6:30-32 Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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You may have heard that I'm going away for a while. Six weeks to be precise. Just for the record, I want you to know that I didn't approach the Session and tell them that I desperately needed to get away for an extended period of time. Nor did the Session come to me and tell me that they desperately needed me to go away for an extended period of time. Rather, upon the completion of a pastor's 7th year of ministry within the same congregation, the Presbytery of Eastern Oklahoma respectfully suggests that the Session of that congregation work out something so that the pastor can engage in the opportunity of a sabbatical of some kind, depending, of course, on the capabilities of each congregation to do so.

Well let's just say, College Hill has proved itself more than capable! In recognizing this rare and remarkable opportunity, I will never be able to fully express how much the gracious generosity of this congregation means to me. For it is indeed a reflection and affirmation of the strong relationship between us.

Concerning my plans for a sabbatical, as I mentioned in an email that I sent out to the entire congregation this past week: It is important to me to experience not only rest and relaxation during this sabbatical, but also spiritual growth. That is why I have planned a trip to Ireland and Scotland, in what I hope will be a **'spiritual quest pilgrimage'**. I intentionally combined a couple of different concepts in that phrase – a spiritual quest and a pilgrimage - that I'd like to address.

Let's start with the second part. **What is a pilgrimage?** Broadly stated, a pilgrimage is **a journey or search of moral or spiritual significance**. Typically, it is a journey to a shrine or other geographical location of importance to a person's beliefs and faith. The Holy Land, for example, acts as a focal point for the pilgrimages of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

I consider my sabbatical trip to Ireland and the island of Iona off the western coast of Scotland to be a pilgrimage as well. Here's a couple of reasons why. First, my own ancestral roots are primarily Scotch-Irish and English. I hear that there is sometimes a powerful connection when visiting one's ancestral homeland. Second, for quite some time I have had a strong affinity for the type of spirituality practiced by the Celtic and Gaelic people. And it is Scotland, as you may recall, that brought Presbyterianism to this country in the 1600's. So there is a denominational connection as well.

Now it is possible, I suppose, to go on a pilgrimage to a specific place and not have a particularly spiritual experience. It may be fun, educational, and relaxing, but not necessarily what one might describe as spiritual. That's why I'm adding the phrase "spiritual quest" to my sabbatical pilgrimage.

What is a spiritual quest? And how does that differ from a pilgrimage? First of all, you don't necessarily need to travel anywhere to engage in a spiritual quest. I learned

this week about a special program at UCLA called *Spiritual Quest*. It states, “*Spiritual Quest* reflects the degree to which the student is actively searching for meaning and purpose in life, to become a more self-aware and enlightened person, and to find answers to life’s mysteries and “big questions.” While that’s a great endeavor for college students, at my age I’m not as concerned anymore with finding answers to life’s mysteries and “big questions.” I’ve learned that an honest “I don’t know” is often not only the best response, but it is also enough.

I am, however, very interested in spirituality itself. And I know you probably are as well. Spirituality is one of those terms that can be defined in a variety of ways. In other words, there is no one definition. Generally, however, it usually includes **a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves**. It usually involves practices that help us experience the Divine or Sacred in our midst.

Back in 1991, twenty four years ago now, I took a course while I was in seminary entitled, “Spiritual Formation: Models and Practice”. The final exam was a term paper that asked several questions about spirituality, including, “What is a valid spirituality?” Part of my answer was a reflection of how my own definition of spirituality had expanded greatly – to the point, in fact, where I stated that **anything that connects someone with the Divine is a valid spirituality**. That was a remarkably inclusive revelation and understanding when compared to my admittedly narrow, conservative evangelical Christian point of view when I entered seminary in 1989.

That class played an important role in transforming and expanding my own spiritual growth. A primary focus of that spiritual formation class was to help each of us individually come up with what was called our “rule of life,” especially as it applied to faith and spirituality. To quote myself from 1991, I stated, **“My ‘rule of life’ is an intentionality concerning God.”**

After the passage of a couple decades since then, which has involved significant movement into the realm of progressive Christianity, I would only edit that slightly to say that my hope is to live life with an ‘intentionality **toward God.**’ I’m getting close to expanding that to **‘an intentionality toward the Divine and Sacred in our midst.’**

The ‘intentional’ part of that phrase is very important. That means that there is an element of active participation and purpose in seeking out a connection with or experience of God’s presence – every day and in all circumstances of life, including in the mundane ordinary tasks of daily life. I seek to do that not only because I’m a pastor, but also because I am a spiritual person. And guess what, every human being that has ever lived is a spiritual person. **Unfortunately, the sense of the spiritual can be buried or hidden if one isn’t intentional about moving toward God and recognizing the Sacred that is constantly in our midst.**

As I have stated in a recent sermon, one of the pitfalls of progressive Christianity is that we tend to spend a majority of our time delving into the intellectual exploration of new understandings of biblical interpretations and theological doctrines. I’m afraid that in the excitement to redefine our understanding of traditionally understood church dogma, that we often neglect the spiritual side or our journey of faith. **While not abandoning that intellectual endeavor, it is my intention (there’s that intentionality part again) to try to get us, as College Hill Presbyterian Church, to focus a bit more on the spiritual side of our individual and collective journey of faith.** So, that’s why I want to use this remarkable opportunity of a sabbatical to focus on my own spiritual quest pilgrimage. Or, as church member Peg Gotthold texted me this week, “Enjoy your time of visiting the inner world and the outer world. And all spaces in between.”

As previously noted, **I find a rich storehouse of spirituality for progressives embedded in historic Celtic spirituality.** The ancient Celtic peoples of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and elsewhere, were not so focused, like Roman Catholicism, on Augustine's teachings about the inherent depravity of humankind and the concept of 'original sin.' Rather, they approached a life of faith focused on 'original blessing,' – the understanding that **the divine spark of creation is deeply embedded within the essence of all creation. It is *that* understanding that leads to a focus of looking for that divine presence in all things, and in all occasions.**

I want to explore whether a Celtic sensibility to sensing a connection to the Sacred in our midst might also be deeply meaningful for us here in this congregation. We will see. So in a way, even though I will be out of sight and communication for the next 6 weeks, a part of you will indeed be accompanying me on my spiritual quest pilgrimage.

Will it prove fruitful? While I certainly hope so, there are no guarantees, especially in the realm of the spiritual. It will be what it will be. Saying that, I enter into this time away with an increased 'intentionality toward God.'

Before my departure, I want to leave you with the words recorded by the author of the Gospel of John when Jesus comforts his somewhat anxious disciples after he tells them of his impending departure.

Do not let your hearts be troubled...I will not leave you orphaned...I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

- John 14: 1, 18, 25-27

To that end, during the next month and a half, be blessed by the inspired preaching of the Rev. Ann LaMar and the Rev. Gordon Edwards. Rest in the fact that this congregation is filled with gifted, capable and strong leaders. And continue to be a community of support and comfort in reaching out to one another.

Blessings, and Amen.