

Sharing a Spiritual Quest Pilgrimage

A reflection on returning from a 6-week Sabbatical.

Luke 9:28-37 1 Kings 19:11-13a
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Some of you may have noticed that I haven't been behind this pulpit for a while – since April 26, to be precise. I've been on a remarkable journey. A journey made possible by the grace of God and the incredible generosity of this congregation, and for which I am humbly and deeply grateful.

You'll be hearing about my 6-week sabbatical in a variety of ways for years to come. That's another way of declaring, especially to some of you who were just a bit anxious knowing I would extensively reflect upon my life and ministry, that I did *not* discern that God was calling me to move on from College Hill, or to retire.

With so much to share with you, however, I've decided to use this first-Sunday-back sermon to as a way for you to experience part of my journey for yourselves.

The small isle of Iona, which is only 1.5 miles wide by 3 miles long, is part of the Hebrides island chain off the western coast of Scotland. It was back in the year 563 CE that an Irish monk named Columba sailed with twelve companions to Iona to establish a monastery. The form of Christianity practiced at what was then called the "end of the known world," had some theological variations from what was developing as the dominant Roman Catholic form of Christianity. I'll share more on that in the weeks to come. So for over 1,450 years, people have travelled to this cradle of Christianity in Scotland as a place of pilgrimage, seeking healing, inspiration, spiritual growth and new beginnings.

Once a week everyone on Iona is welcome to join the pilgrimage around the island, visiting places of historical and religious significance, and reflecting on the journey of their lives and the life of the world. I was part of a group of 18 who were housed in the Abbey itself. We were part of a special week-long summer course about Iona. Along with a couple of guides, it was this small group who went on that pilgrimage on the Tuesday we were there.

I would like to invite you, using the pictures on your bulletin insert, to accompany me now on that pilgrimage. **But this is a participatory journey.** Rather than me just sharing my own experience, it is my hope that you will experience it as well. After a short reflection at each stop, we will join in a prayer, also printed on your bulletin insert. **This pilgrimage, it's important to note, while personal in nature, is meant to be a communal event. Everyone journeys together.**

The first stop on our pilgrimage is at the foot of **St. Martin's Cross**. This high Celtic cross, made of a single slab of stone late in the 8th century, has stood at this exact location for 1200 years! It even predates the Abbey itself by over 400 years. As a testament to its endurance, this cross survived numerous Viking raids, Anglo-Saxon invasions, the Norman Conquest, and perhaps most remarkably, the Protestant Reformation, which basically shut down monasticism in Scotland, Ireland and Britain in the 16th century.

You can see that the cross is beautifully designed and carved. The side of the cross in the photograph faces the west, and is carved with scenes from biblical stories. Near the bottom, mimicking the design on the majority of the entire east side of the cross, are intertwined serpents or snakes winding around what are called bosses, raised knob-like features.

Why have snakes on a cross? We usually associate them with the story of Adam and Eve. As it turns out, they also had a different significance. Snakes shed their old skin and replace it with a new skin. It symbolizes, therefore, a kind of resurrection.

Reflection: As you gaze upon this cross, reflect upon something that you may need to shed in your life, preparing a way for something new to replace it.

Join me in the prayer at St. Martin's Cross as we begin our pilgrimage.

St. Martin's Cross

Bless to us, O God,
the earth beneath our feet.
Bless to us, O God,
the path whereon we go.
Bless to us, O God,
the people whom we meet.



The next stop on our pilgrimage, as we journey together, isn't too far away. It's **The Augustinian Nunnery**, built around the same time as the early-13th century Benedictine Abbey. Unfortunately, the nunnery still stands in ruins. Also, unfortunately, there is very little historical record of these women's lives. History focused almost entirely on the Abbey. This echoes the way that, over the centuries, a male-dominated society and church has made women invisible. Their ministry was often in the home and local community – not in the places of power.

The ancient Celtic Church, however, was known to offer a greater balance between the feminine and masculine, as well as a celebration of the interweaving of the material and the spiritual, and an affirmation of the goodness of creation and the human body.

Reflection: Recall special women of faith, those known, unknown, and the ones in your life. Give thanks for their lives and witness.

Let's read together the prayer at The Augustinian Nunnery.

The Augustinian Nunnery

Bless to us, O God,
our souls that come from on high.
Bless to us, O God,
our bodies that are of earth.
Bless to us, O God,
each thing our eyes see.
Bless to us, O God,
each thing our ears hear.
Bless to us, O God,
each odor that goes to our nostrils.
Bless to us, O God,
each taste that goes to our lips,
each note that goes to our song,
each ray that guides our way.
Amen.



Because I forgot to take a picture at our next stop, it's not on your bulletin insert, so I will simply explain it to you. We stopped at the only **crossroads** on Iona – two dirt roads. A crossroads, in the context of a pilgrimage, represents a **place of decisions**.

Reflection: Reflect upon the crossroads in your own life's journey, those times and places where your decisions may have taken you down new and unfamiliar paths. Further do you discern that now may be a time to take a new path in your life, or to stay on the one you are on already?

After this reflection on Iona I turned to the person next to me and said how relieved I was to have a sense of confirmation that I am indeed on the right path in being at the congregation I serve.

Following a climb up and over a rugged and boggy set of hills on the southernmost part of the island, we find ourselves at **St. Columba's Bay**. St. Columba's Bay has a very stony beach, rather than a sandy one. We remember Columba's journey in 563 CE that took him away from the safety of the known. And we consider the turning points in our own lives, before heading homeward.

Reflection: As you listen (metaphorically) to the crashing surf, reflect upon the things that you feel may be holding you back from making a fresh start, or that weigh you down as you try to journey onward. In your mind, pick up one of the stones on the beach and walk to the water line. This stone is symbolic of that which you would wish to let go of – something you need to leave behind and not take home with you. Cast this rock into the sea. As you turn away, pick up a second stone to keep as a sign of a new direction or commitment that you hope to move towards, as together we begin our return journey. Here's the commitment stone that I picked up on St. Columba's Bay that day.

Let's read the prayer at St. Columba's Bay together.

St. Columba's Bay

And now, may kindly Columba guide you
to be an isle in the sea,
to be a hill on the shore,
to be a star in the night,
to be a staff for the weak.
Amen.



On our way back we climb a hill to find **The Hermit's Cell**, now only a secluded ring of stones. Over the centuries this has been a place of solitude. Perhaps this was Columba's place of hermitage. Times of solitude and silence undergird the busyness and demands of living interwoven in community.

As well as hearing the word of God through the scriptures, through creation and through one another, we can experience the word of God deep within us, at the very heart of all being.

Let's read the prayer at The Hermit's Cell together.

The Hermit's Cell

Deep peace of the running wave to you,
Deep peace of the flowing air to you,
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you,
Deep peace of the shining stars to you,
Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.
Amen.



It wasn't until a couple of days later, our last full day on the island, that I journeyed on my own to another place of pilgrimage on Iona. It's called **Dun I**, which simply means the hill of Iona. It's the highest point on the island at 332'. It is located fairly close to the Abbey, as you can see in the picture on your bulletin insert. On a clear day, like in the first picture, you can see the entire island, and way beyond.



In the biblical tradition, mountains or hills have been understood as places of new vision and transfiguration. That's why I chose the story known as the Transfiguration as today's Gospel

reading from Luke 9. But notice that the story of Peter, John and James' remarkable mountaintop spiritual experience didn't last very long. It was the very next morning they had to follow Jesus back down the mountain to the "real life" of the valley where the people live and work. It was the very next morning that I had to board the ferry to leave Iona and begin my journey home.

Reflection: If Iona is like a hilltop spiritual experience of new perspective, then often the places that we return to are more like the real life of the valley. Refocus on those places of both struggle and joy in your own life that you belong to and are aware of.

Let's read the prayer of peace at Dun I together.

Dun I

Peace between nations,
 peace between neighbors,
 peace between lovers,
 in love of the God of life.
 Peace between person and person,
 peace between spouses,
 peace between parent and child,
 the peace of Christ above all peace.
 Bless O Christ our faces,
 let our faces bless everything.
 Bless O Christ our eyes,
 let our eyes bless all they see.
 Amen.



Let me close by mentioning that on the day I climbed to the top of this hill, it was covered in a deep fog. It was powerfully windy, cold, and misty wet. As I sat up there by myself, trying to buffer my body from the inclement weather, I recalled this morning's Old Testament reading from 1 Kings. It's the familiar story of how Elijah experienced God *not* in the great and powerful wind, the earthquake, or the fire. Instead, God was experienced as a gentle whisper, as a still small voice, or even as sheer silence.

During my spiritual quest pilgrimage to Ireland and Iona, Scotland, I will admit that I was somewhat hoping that I would experience the presence of God in those more spectacular ways, like a powerful wind, earthquake, or fire. Instead, perhaps more in line with my own current journey of faith and understanding of God, my spiritual experiences were more like the simple recognition of a Sacred Presence in all things and events.

Know that our spiritual quest pilgrimage, as individuals and as a community of faith, never comes to an end. I am so thankful that we are on that pilgrimage journey together. So let's join together in the closing prayer for strength and vision to continue the journey.

**May God be a bright flame before you,
 be a guiding star above you,
 be a smooth path below you,
 be a kindly shepherd behind you,
 today, tomorrow and forever.**

Amen.

And Amen.