

Sermon Mark 10:35-45

22nd Pentecost

October 20, 2024

We are living in quite amazing times. Technology has gotten us to the point where we don't have to leave the comfort of our home in order to connect with others, or to explore the world. And this turned out to be such a blessing when the pandemic hit in 2020, and we couldn't meet in person for months on end. Technology kept us connected.

These days, we can travel, explore and connect virtually without moving an inch from our chair or couch. But that wasn't always so. Just think a few decades back. In order to meet people, and in order to explore the world, one would have to hit the road, one would have to be on the move. Special encounters happened (and, for that matter, still happen) on the road. Thinking spiritually, God often was encountered on the move as well. Think of all the pilgrimages people of faith have made. There is a special spiritual dimension to being on the road, walking, praying, meditating.

Now I've never been on a pilgrimage, though my husband Fred and I have dreamed about walking the Camino de Santiago for years. Has anyone here ever been on a pilgrimage?

But we've done lots of hiking. And my experience has been that, while on the move, I encountered things, and sometimes people, too, that otherwise I wouldn't have encountered. To be on the move opens new horizons for us.

Being on the road, on the way, even has had consequences not only for the person walking, but for history. 11 days from now, on October 31st, many Protestant churches are going to commemorate the Reformation, which was started by Martin Luther. And, by the way, the Reformation isn't only important for Lutherans, but inspired other reformers like Zwingli, Calvin, and Henry VIII. Arguable Martin Luther can be called the Father of most Protestants.

Anyway, the Reformation may never have happened if Luther, at that point still a young Augustinian monk, hadn't made a pilgrimage to Rome. Luther was touched by the deep piety and faith of the pilgrims he encountered on the road, but at the same time appalled by how commercialized any spiritual experience was in Rome. Pilgrims basically had to pay for everything: attending masses, seeing relics,

buying religious chatzkies that were offered everywhere with the promise of blessing or healing; and of course pilgrims were scared into buying indulgences either for themselves or a loved one, alive or deceased, so that the time in the dreaded purgatory might be significantly shortened. And if you want to know more about all this, ask me after the service. And this experience led Luther to reflect on the power politics and corruption of the church in Rome which led to the Reformation.

In the Bible, we have numerous stories of folks having important encounters on the road, on the move. There is the Apostle Paul, who at first was zealously persecuting the young Christian community, and who had his conversion, his turn-around moment, on the road to Damascus. On the third day after the crucifixion, Jesus doesn't appear to his remaining 11 disciples first, who are hiding away in fear, but to the women who make the journey to the tomb. The disciples on the road to Emmaus recognize the risen Lord after spending a day on the road with him. Case in point: if you look through the Bible, you will realize that God is often encountered on the road.

In today's gospel story, Jesus and the disciples are on the road. Jesus usually talks about the real important stuff while being in motion. The three times Jesus announces his suffering and death to the 12, it happens while on the road. In fact, the third time and final time Jesus announces his death happens right before the scene of today's gospel story. So this is the setting: as Jesus and the 12 are on their way to Jerusalem, and on the way to the cross, Jesus tells them: I have to suffer and die. And on the third day be raised from the dead.

Imagine being on the road with Jesus and hearing this. How would you feel? Disturbed? Awful? Would you maybe be in denial? Would you maybe want to turn around and get the hell away from Jerusalem?

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, apparently only hear the part about Jesus being raised in glory. And by worldly standards, they'd have some claim to participation in that glory. Haven't they given up everything – jobs, family, community, status – to join Jesus? Haven't they been among the first to follow Jesus, haven't they been among the closest of Jesus' followers even? So what's the reward for that? And they ask Jesus: master, please do this one thing for us: let us sit next to you in your glory. To which Jesus basically replies, well, you will join me in my suffering and death, but to sit at my right and my left in glory is not something for you to request – or for me to grant.

Case closed? No. The other 10 disciples witness the request of James and John, and they become quite envious and angry, we hear. Hey, who do they think you are? Don't we all deserve the honor of sitting next to Jesus – maybe even more than you two?

They are on the road, a road to suffering and death. And all they can think about is sitting pretty in glory. But this is not a time to sit.

So Jesus calls them on it. It is not about glory, he says. It's not about sitting down, finding your place, staying put and basking in the glory of God. It's about service. It's about the journey. It's about staying in motion. This is where you find and experience God.

Now is being on the road, traveling, always easy and enjoyable? No. Our car breaks down, flights are delayed, our luggage gets lost, we catch illnesses, and, and, and. I enjoyed my recent travels to Berlin and San Francisco, but came home with an awful cold. That flight back to JFK was unpleasant, to say the least.

Holy journeys can be unpleasant, too. Pilgrims, even modern ones, have complained about blistered feet, being drenched by the rain, and exhaustion.

In the same way, it's not always easy being on the road with Christ. Jesus talks about service, instead of being served, and that is not always easy. As the disciples on the road can attest. They long for a rest, they long for the reward of just sitting, preferably right next to Jesus.

But this is what being a follower of Christ is all about – to be on the road, to be on the move, and to serve those we encounter. We are reminded that we are on the way with Jesus. Jesus' story, Jesus' way, is our story and our way. Christ, as he came into the world, knew that this would not be a time to bask in the glory of the one who sent him, and to bask in his successes, but that instead he had to continuously go to the people, serve them, and bring the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. His life was a journey. The early Christians knew that, which is precisely why they called themselves, "the way."

Do we understand ourselves as being on 'the way' today? I think we all long to be settled, to arrive, to rest from the journey – to be home. It's the same with churches. We like our traditions, our buildings, all those things that give us a feeling of stability, a feeling of home in a fast-changing world, right?

The challenge – Christ’s challenge – for us today is to find a balance between being stable, being at home with God – and to heed the call for movement and service, the call to be on the way, to be ‘the way’. Maybe we could put it this way: because we have a home here, within God’s church, because we feel secure and nourished, because we know where and to whom we belong, and that nothing will ever change that, we can confidently be on our way, seeking new paths, going on an adventure of being on the road with Christ, serving those in need - and, along the way, experience things we’ve never experienced before, encounter people we’ve never encountered before, meet God in places we never would have expected to meet God, all the while having Christ to our left and to our right as we journey, together. And the more I think about it, the more I find that today’s gospel is a great lesson as we begin our ministry, our journey together, here, at Old Steeple, and this is not only my first Sunday here, but Anyi’s as well. Talk about a fresh start, talk about setting out on a new stretch of the road.

And the time we live in right now with all the challenges we encounter is not a time to sit down. We are on a journey – individually and as church. We are pilgrims through this life and into the next. It is a holy journey, we are stepping on holy ground wherever we go. Is being on the road, travel, always enjoyable? We already talked about that, no. However, in the footsteps of Christ and accompanied by the Holy Spirit, we can be confident that our journey will be blessed and bring us fulfillment beyond measure.

So may God bless this journey – and especially the journey we set out on today, together, as the people of Old Steeple in this time and place. Amen