

Pilgrims Walking Sermon Series
“The Pilgrim’s Posture”
Proverbs 3:5-6, Acts 16:6-10
Rev. Joy Laughridge
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This morning we’re still in our Pilgrims Walking sermon series, and if you’re following Jesus, that makes you a pilgrim walking, too. I’ve been sharing some about my pilgrimage on the Camino this summer, but the real goal as we’re going through this series is to listen for what God has to say to pilgrims walking the road of discipleship.

For a quick review, the first week we talked about taking the first step. You’re not on the pilgrimage of discipleship until you respond to Jesus’s invitation and take that first step. Last week we talked about how the pilgrimage is personal – we all walk our own path– but it’s also communal. Jesus is with us leading and supporting, and we walk and talk with other pilgrims along the way who help us on the journey. Today this message is about the *posture of the pilgrim*.

That title does make me think about what our physical posture was like as we walked the Camino. Sometimes on the hillier parts, I walked with kind of a lean forward, and I thought about my friend Karla and what she called her “flop.” At times, if she got too hot, or too tired, or the blisters were too sore, she gave herself permission to assume a horizontal position on the ground until she felt better. That’s not what I’m talking when I say the pilgrim’s posture though. What I’m talking about is the pilgrim’s *attitude* and the condition of the heart that the pilgrim tries to maintain while walking. It’s the pilgrim’s attitude, or posture, that makes all the difference, and it’s one of the main things that distinguishes a pilgrimage from a vacation.

When I was in Spain, we did go places and do things that people go on vacation in Spain to do. We took our first steps on the Camino in a beautiful coastal city called San Sebastian which is known for its beautiful beach and its food. In San Sebastian, *pintxos* – another word for tapas- is very popular, and there are a ton of little bars and cafes where you can eat pintxos. The city also has one of the highest concentrations of Michelin star restaurants per capita in the world. I didn't realize in advance that we were going to be in San Sebastian or Zarautz, another popular beach destination, so I didn't bring a bathing suit, but I did enjoy walking on the beach, and I had the chance to eat pintxos and have dinner at a Michelin star restaurant. At the halfway point of our trip, we also got to spend a couple of days in Bilboa which is a beautiful city and home to one of the Guggenheim museums which we did visit.

There were plenty of vacationers and tourists in San Sebastian and in Bilbao, and we were right there with them enjoying the food and the attractions. By all appearances, we could have been just another group on holiday in Spain, but there was one important difference between ourselves and the other tourists. As *pilgrims*, our purpose for coming to Spain wasn't tourism. Even though we got to enjoy some of the things that tourists enjoy along the way, our goal wasn't consumption. Our goal was to be receptive and attentive to God wherever and whenever we encountered God throughout the journey. Our goal wasn't just to *have* experiences, but to allow God to teach, and direct, and form us through the experiences that we had.

This is what I mean when I talk about the posture of a pilgrim. A pilgrim brings to the journey humility, attentiveness, a willingness to learn, adapt, and be changed, and this allows the pilgrimage to become such a transformative experience. To give you a concrete example, I can tell you about our stay in a city called Gernika.

Gernika was famously bombed by the Germans in 1937 which resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties and injuries. Picasso was inspired by the event to paint his famous painting Guernica which depicts the chaos and suffering on that day. Today, it's a lively city with a beautiful square where people gather and socialize. We arrived there after our fourth day of hiking, and I think because it was a Friday evening, there was a lot of activity in the square and around the city near our hotel. People were out eating and drinking in cafes and restaurants, there was a soccer game in the park, and a live band playing in the street.

When we arrived at our hotel after walking 15 miles in the heat, we quickly learned that the rooms were not air conditioned. The room that my roommate and I shared didn't even have a fan and the window only opened part way. That night as we tried to sleep, it felt to me like I had been buried alive in a coffin. There was no air moving at all. Just oppressive heat. This was a situation that seemed to justify complaining and irritation, and if we had arrived in Gernika as vacationers expecting to join in on the Friday night festivities and then retire to comfortable accommodations, we might have been frustrated and angry. We weren't *happy* to discover no ac or *excited* about suffering through a long hot night, but, as pilgrims walking with a posture of humility and openness, we were more ready to accept the situation and to trust that even in the uncomfortable circumstances, we could receive God's grace in some way. This kind of attitude was so important as we made our pilgrimage on the Camino. It made such a difference in how we experienced the journey and in how we were shaped by the journey, and it makes a difference in how we experience and how we're shaped by our journey as pilgrim disciples, too.

To see more clearly the difference that it makes as we walk as Jesus's disciples, it helps to go back to that distinction between a vacation and a pilgrimage. It is tempting to, and maybe sometimes we do, follow Jesus in the posture of the consumer tourist. When this is our attitude, getting what we want really becomes the most important priority and following Jesus can become just a means to getting the ends we want whatever those things are. When that is the mindset, the relationship with Jesus and the journey itself aren't so important, and difficulties or detours that you might encounter on the journey are viewed purely as obstacles to curse or opportunities to doubt the leader. When the road doesn't take you to the partner, or success, or the wealth that you wanted to find, you might begin to wonder if God is even good or if God even loves you.

I saw a video on Facebook that illustrates what I'm talking about. It was a man talking about why he was giving up on God and walking away from Jesus and the church. He talked about how he had done everything that he was supposed to do for years and years. He had gone to the Bible studies, attended worship services, gave money to the church. He had done it all faithfully, but after all that, he was angry, and disappointed, and disillusioned because God hadn't given him the things that he'd been expecting. He wasn't rich. He wasn't extraordinarily successful. He was still just an ordinary guy with problems like everyone else. It was sort of like he had walked 15 miles in the hot sun to have a good time in Gernika only to find out that he was going to have to spend a miserable night in a hotel without air conditioning and that was unacceptable. Trip over!

I can understand and sympathize with the man's disappointment because life is hard and disappointing, and there are times when our faith is tested and times when nothing seems to be working out and we do wonder where God is and what God is doing. That's a natural part of being on a faith journey, but the sad part was

that it *seemed* like he'd spent all those years trying to follow Jesus only as a consumer, making transactions, and had missed the chance to be formed, and fed, and filled as Jesus promises to form, feed, and fill us when we trust him and surrender ourselves and our way to him.

The truth is Jesus never promises to give us everything we *want*. He never promises that the way will be easy if we come after him. What he does promise is that as we follow him, he will transform us. He will do things and give us things that are worth far more than the material things or earthly pleasures that can be so attractive, and the good news is that Jesus is always working to do what he has promised. He is *always* working when we know he is and when we aren't sure if he is; when life is good and when life is hard; when our prayers are answered and when they don't seem to be. Not getting what we want when we want it, isn't a sign that God is dead, or faithless, or uncaring.

Still, it can be hard to believe when we can't see, and that's why Proverbs reminds and urges us to trust in the Lord and lean not on our own understanding. Those verses in Proverbs beautifully describe the posture that we need as we follow Jesus, and our reading from Acts offers a wonderful illustration of pilgrims walking in that posture.

For context, what we read in Acts 16 happened during Paul's second missionary journey. He and his companion Silas had set out with a goal and a plan in mind which was to go back to the cities that he had visited on his first missionary journey to encourage the new believers in those places and to preach along the way. They traveled along that route up to a certain point and then they began to deviate from that course because it says in Acts 16: 6 that they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit. We have no idea how the Holy Spirit communicated with them. It could have been through some kind of

obstacles that they encountered, and in reflecting on it, they sensed that it was through the obstacle that the Spirit was redirecting them. Maybe someone spoke a prophetic word to them, and they believed it was truly from the Lord. Maybe it was just something they had an intuition about. In any case, they perceived that the Spirit was directing and they allowed themselves to be redirected.

As they carried on moving to the north, they had planned to turn east, but God intervened again to redirect them, and this time we're told that it was through a vision that Paul had. He had a vision of a man in Macedonia asking Paul to come and help them. Again, Paul and his companions demonstrated a posture of receptivity, openness, and trust, and went where they were led. The outcome of the story is remarkable. Once in the city of Philippi, which was in the region of Macedonia, Paul and his companions met a woman named Lydia who ended up being the first convert to Christianity in Europe recorded in Scripture.

When Paul originally set out on his second missionary journey, he probably never imagined an outcome like this and going to Europe wasn't the goal he was aiming for. He *did* have a plan and an intention, and it seemed to be a good one. As we follow Jesus as his disciples, we can have intentions and goals that we want to accomplish, too. The message isn't that we can't want or hope for things, and trusting Jesus as our leader doesn't mean complete passivity, but it does look a lot like what we see in this story about Paul. It looks like walking in the pilgrim's posture of attentiveness, receptivity, and trust, so that we are able to be redirected when that fits God's purposes, and we are able to see something from a different perspective, and we are able to be formed, fed, and filled even on paths we wouldn't have chosen and in ways that we wouldn't have expected.

Posture probably isn't something that we think about very often. That's why mothers have to remind their kids to stand up straight and why when you're doing something like dance, where posture is important, the dance teacher might have to keep reminding you to pay attention to your posture. When we're not thinking about it, most of us naturally just tend to slump a little. The posture of our hearts as we follow Jesus may not be something that we normally think much about either. It's easy to just walk with the attitude and disposition of the heart that comes naturally, and the natural posture may not always be one of humility, attentiveness, and receptivity. We may need to be reminded to sit up straight, and today some of us may need to hear this reminder to give attention to our posture as we walk with Jesus. The posture of the pilgrim really can make all the difference in our perspective, and in how we navigate the hard parts, and in who we become when we're pilgrims walking. Amen.