

Pilgrims Walking Sermon Series
“Walking and Talking”
Psalm 23, Mark 1:14-20, 2:13-14
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Last week I began telling you some about my experience over the summer, and we began a sermon series called Pilgrims Walking. In June and July, I was a pilgrim walking along a portion of the Camino de Santiago in Spain, and if Jesus is your Lord and Savior and you are his disciple, you are a pilgrim walking, too. Discipleship is a pilgrimage and a journey that is in many ways very much like the one I was on this summer, and that's what this series is about.

Last week we talked about the first step. The pilgrimage begins when you take the first step, and we do that by responding to Jesus's invitation to trust and follow him. Today I want to talk about how discipleship is a personal pilgrimage, but it isn't supposed to be a journey that we make on our own.

When it comes to walking the Camino, there are lots of people who begin walking without a friend, or a group, or a leader to accompany them. The pilgrimage is a very personal experience. People are usually bringing with them a personal problem, or a question, a longing, or some intention and the walk offers space for prayer, contemplation, and discovery. Others, even when they are bringing a personal problem or intention with them to the Camino begin, like I did, in the company of others.

Many of you have asked me if I went with a group, and the answer is yes. I was very fortunate to be able to go as part of a group made up of 9 other clergy and two leaders. Our main leader is a preaching professor at Columbia Seminary, and the other clergy were from different places

around the country and from different denominations. We had two United Methodists, one Congregationalist, two Baptists, and four Presbyterians including me, and yes, inevitably, the joke kept coming up, “A Presbyterian, a Baptist, and a Methodist walk into a café ...”

Whether you begin with others like I did or choose to begin walking the Camino alone, as it turns out, you never really walk the Camino alone. There might be stretches of walking in solitude, but walking the Camino is truly a communal experience. There is a movie starring Martin Sheen and Emilio Esteves called *The Way* about one man’s Camino pilgrimage. I recommend watching it if you want to get a good idea of what the pilgrimage is like. That’s why I watched it just a couple of days before I left for Spain, and if you watch the movie you’ll see how a man who sets out on his journey alone doesn’t walk that way for very long. One of the things that is said about the Camino is “the Camino provides,” and one of the things that it provides is companionship and community.

One of my favorite things about the experience this summer was the walking and talking. I deeply appreciated and enjoyed the conversations with my fellow preacher friends. Sometimes we just told each other funny stories from our lives. We shared family histories with each other. We listened to each other and talked together about the personal questions and intentions that were we each carrying with us. We talked about our ministry settings and about the joys and challenges that we each experience as pastors. We talked about the mysteries of faith and pondered theological questions. There were hours of walking each day so there was plenty of time to talk about every subject under the sun. I had all those kinds of conversations with people in my group, but they weren’t limited to the people in my group, and one of my *other* favorite things about the Camino was the chance to walk and talk with fellow pilgrims that we just met along the way.

We met lots of people along the way as we stopped to fill our water bottles or rested under the shade of a tree, and often after that we would walk and talk for a while with the new people we met. Then, later the same day, or maybe the next day, you might run into each other again and walk and talk some more. These people were all strangers initially, and we were all different people coming from different countries, speaking different languages, having different professions, and backgrounds, yet there was a sense of almost immediate connection because of our shared purpose and goal. That's what makes the Camino a communal experience.

I loved walking and talking because in general I just like to walk and talk, and I'm a "people person" who loves meeting new people, but the sense of community that I experienced on the Camino wasn't just a fun byproduct of being on the pilgrimage. The community that I experienced with others was a central feature and one of the primary means through which Jesus made himself known to me, and helped me, and formed me, and gave me the grace that helped me keep walking until I reached the goal. This was true on the Camino, and this is something that is true when it comes to the pilgrimage of discipleship, too. The relationship that we have with Jesus is personal. The journey we make is a personal one, but we need to be, and we're meant to be in community with others as we make our journey.

This is one of the things that we can see from our Gospel reading this morning. When Jesus began calling disciples, he didn't just call one person. He began forming a fellowship of disciples. He called to Peter and Andrew, then to James and John, and then later to Levi- who we also know as Matthew- extending a personal invitation to each one of them, but they would all be following the same leader, in the same direction, toward the same ultimate goal. Like the diverse group of pilgrims who

each walk their own path on the Camino, this diverse group of twelve men would each make their own journey in their own way, but they would do it with others at their side.

I don't think it was an accident that Jesus formed a *group* of disciples. This was an intentional decision because Jesus knew how important and how necessary companionship and camaraderie is for pilgrims walking. Friends on the journey are the ones who can offer a helping hand and lift us up if we should stumble or get stuck somewhere along the way. They are the ones who can offer refreshment if our own water bottle runs out, and they are the ones who cheer us on when the road is hard, and we don't feel like we can keep going.

There was a day this summer when we were making a very steep climb in full sun with no shade. Just when you thought you might be getting near the top, the hill just kept going. My friend Scott (one of the other Presbyterians from Nashville) and I were trudging up the hill, and we weren't really talking much because the going was pretty hard. He was a little further ahead pressing on. At one point I called out and said, "I don't want to keep going up. I don't want to walk anymore." I don't remember if he even really answered me, but just seeing him ahead of me, watching him put one step in front of the other, helped me to keep doing the same even though my feet, my legs, and my *will* to keep climbing felt about to expire. This is how our fellow travelers can help us in those times when following Jesus feels too hard, too, and we need that kind of support. Sometimes just knowing and seeing that we have people around us who are walking helps us keep walking, too.

It's in the walking and talking, too, that sometimes things are clarified for us and we're able to discern what we're supposed to do next. When we have doubts or questions, it helps to have people to talk to who can listen *to* us, and listen *with* us. Sometimes it is in and through our fellow

travelers that we recognize what we know is the voice and presence of Jesus himself.

One day I had the chance to walk with a man named Roman. He was a young man in his thirties from France, and he had started out on the Camino alone and with an intention. His intention, he told me, was basically to try to become a person whose life matched his words and his convictions. He didn't want to say he believed certain things and then live in a way that contradicted that. His concrete example was smoking. When he started the Camino, he smoked, but he knew smoking was bad for him, so he wanted to finish the Camino as someone who didn't smoke—someone whose actions were consistent with what he believed. He shared his personal story and some of his faith journey with me, and then he asked me about my own intentions. I talked to him about my own call to ministry and said I was looking for confirmation that I am still called and that I can still be a help to God's people. As we were coming to the end of the time we walked together, he said to me, "I think you can keep going. I think you can still be a help to God's people." Those aren't the exact words, but that was the essence of it, and the whole time we had been talking, and especially in those moments when he gave me those words of affirmation, I had a kind of Emmaus Road experience where my heart seemed to be stirred up and burning inside, and I had the sense that in Roman, Jesus himself had been walking and talking with me.

These are the kind of things that can happen when we recognize our fellow travelers as a gift that God provides for us and when we are willing to walk and talk with others, but sometimes we fail to appreciate the gift or we may even resist the gift.

Maybe it feels a bit awkward to talk about things that feel deeply personal like our faith, or our failures, or our questions so we keep it all

to ourselves. Maybe we compare ourselves to others who seem to be further along or more successful than we are in some way, so we just keep struggling on our own and feel afraid to reach out. Maybe we think we already know everything we need to know and that we have nothing to learn from others, so we don't engage with others who could be the very ones God would use to teach us. Maybe we avoid interacting with the other pilgrims who are annoying, or too different, or who would seem to slow us down when really, relationships with those people might be the ones that teach us most about how to love like Jesus loves. It's easy to come up with reasons to say, "I'm fine on my own. I can do this. I don't need anyone else," but really we do need the others who are walking behind, and beside, and ahead of us on the path behind Jesus.

If you have been trying to rely only on yourself and only on your own resources, God is speaking today to remind you, you don't have to do that. If you have been feeling lonely or isolated, it doesn't have to be that way. Look to your right and to your left. Right here is a room full of fellow travelers to walk and talk with. Let yourself get to know them, and let them get to know you. Make a commitment to "walk and talk" with each other at Wednesday night dinners, or by participating in Sunday school, or in choir, or on a ministry team. Let your spiritual needs or your spiritual discouragements be known and let others share theirs with you so that you can help each other to keep walking.

The Scripture and the stories I've shared this morning do show us how God gives us to each other and gives grace to us through each other, but I can't end without giving attention also to the word that comes to us today through the Psalm. In Psalm 23 we are reminded that we and all the other pilgrims on the road of discipleship are together like a big flock of sheep. We have each other which is so important, but where would we be without our shepherd? God gives others to us, but it's important to remember that God gives us himself, too.

Not everyone has a leader when they walk the Camino, but my group and I did, and for that I was so thankful. And our leader wasn't just some guy that said, "I don't know what I'm doing, but hey, let me get a group of preachers together, lead them on a long walk and we'll see what happens!" That would not have been a trustworthy leader, but our leader Jake was someone who had made the whole journey himself before he ever tried leading us. Jake knew the way, and he knew where the trail was going to get hard and where it would be easier. He did a lot of work in advance to help us get prepared – telling us what gear to get and how to train, and then, when it came to go, he was right there with us. He walked with us and talked with us. He hung back with the slowest person when needed. He talked with us about our personal questions and intentions. He prepared in advance a place for us to rest and sleep each night. At the end of the long day, he bought us dinner and told us we did a great job. He led us, and supported us, and helped each one of us along, until we all reached our destination.

This is the kind of Shepherd that God is for us. Jesus is that leader who knows the way, and knows what we need, and knows how to help us because he has already walked the whole path. *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*, right? He is the Shepherd who walks and talks with us from the beginning of the journey until the end supporting us in all the ways Jake supported our group and then some. We need the warmth and companionship that we get from the other sheep, but oh how we need the Shepherd who leads us.

Discipleship is not a solo adventure. We are *pilgrims walking*- with each other and with our Lord who leads us. Thanks be to God for these wonderful gifts. Amen.