

Advent as Pilgrimage

Luke 1:39-56

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As many of you know, I recently returned from a pilgrimage. During my study leave I spent eight days at the Taize Community in the southeastern hills of France. Taize is made up of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox brothers and dozens of volunteers that maintain this pilgrim destination for the tens of thousands of visitors that pass through each year.

The week I attended was one of the smallest. There were only 40 visitors, and the community had a close intimate feel as we sang, prayed, ate, and worked together. While I would have loved the experience of thousands praying beside me, I was OK with having a little extra space. FYI, folks at Taize tend to pray with their shoes off.

Hygiene aside, I met some amazing fellow pilgrims along the way.

Sebastian was a 28-year-old, hipster glasses wearing, German engineer who was discerning how to be a more faithful Roman Catholic. He wanted to more closely align his spirituality with social justice. He knew what it was like to be dependent upon public assistance from a recent long stretch of unemployment. Now that he was settled, he felt ready to give back. With all the tension between immigrants and locals in his home city of Cologne, he resolved to become more active as an ally of refugees.

Carmine was a free-spirited 18-year-old from Oregon who sported a crew cut. She was taking a gap year between high school and a liberal arts education, and had just finished walking the Camino de Santiago. She was committing herself to contemplative prayer before heading to New Zealand to work on an organic farm.

Esther was a 30-year-old social worker from Sweden, who was introducing her husband to Taize. She had volunteered in the community for nearly a year and a half in her early 20s. Taize was the place that helped her discover her vocation. She returned for a week or two every year to re-center her prayer life and reconnect with her call.

I believed I was at Taize to learn more about their worship. I figured I owed it to First Church to discover a few tricks of the trade for creating a spiritual center that attracts thousands of people. It turns out there was not really any tricks to the success of Taize. Their approach is rather obvious but also defiantly counter-cultural: they welcome young people and frankly all people who visit as pilgrims.

While our culture has a cruel tendency to treat people as commodities to be exploited, the Taize brothers and volunteers welcome all as companions sharing a spiritual journey. They invite visitors into worship that is filled with beautiful contemplative music and silence that helps create space for people to hear how the Spirit is calling them. They invite them into Bible Study that offers a space for them to hear and be heard from others about how God's Word speaks in their lives. They invite them into practical work and fellowship that deepens their connections with the place and the people around them. The brothers of Taize teach union with God and neighbor by inviting people to embody it along with them. If you accept their invitation, you leave transformed, reinvigorated for the pilgrimage that lies ahead.

In today's reading we encounter Mary, the soon to be mother of Jesus, making a pilgrimage of over 80 miles from Nazareth to the home of her relative Elizabeth, the soon to be mother of John the Baptist. This event in the Gospel of Luke, immediately follows the passage where the Angel Gabriel shares the news that God has chosen Mary to carry the Messiah. Mary enthusiastically assents, proclaiming, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Mary and Elizabeth's interaction overflows with joy. Elizabeth joyously welcomes her, and we are told the baby John leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb at the holiness of the encounter. Mary then gives an impassioned song of praise, known as the Magnificat, declaring, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior." The overwhelming purpose that she has found in her pilgrimage has also filled her with joy.

On our own Advent pilgrimage, we can learn from Mary and take time to be in touch with the joy of our own calls. In fact, today is known as Gaudete Sunday or Rejoicing Sunday,

and we lit the pink Joy Candle on our Advent wreath. Joy reflects something far more profound than happiness. Joy is more than feeling good, more than contentment with one's circumstances, it is also a deep connection to one's sense of purpose. Joy depends on finding fulfillment in your life's direction. Since life itself never stands still, we are pilgrim people whose joy is contingent upon keeping our eyes on the horizon, being mindful of where we are headed.

Sunggu Yang in a recent article pointed out that we have a habit of lifting up Jesus as Son of God, Lord of the Universe, and King of Kings, while failing to adequately emphasize Jesus as Pilgrim. Focusing on Jesus as a Pilgrim allows us to revere the preciousness of his humanity, the gift of the one who lived, wept, protested, ate, drank, and walked along side us. As the Gospel of John tells us, the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. Jesus was not of this world but came as a pilgrim, so that we might take part in his abundant, joyful life that continues in his Spirit.

During his earthly pilgrimage Jesus talked and walked the values of Mary's song of praise, living in solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the least of these among us. Jesus and Mary's example of pilgrimage is a call to not be too comfortable with the exploitative state of the world. The just world that God began to unfold in Jesus and will one day fully reveal itself is our true home.

In the mean time, we can follow in the footsteps of Jesus' pilgrimage and attempt to love it with as much grace. We can take our time as pilgrims seriously. We can invest in our own spiritual journeys by carving out a little quiet time for ourselves, attending a special service, or perhaps joining the yoga or choir group we always wanted to try. We might just find joy in the abundance of purpose it offers, discovering that we have more to share than we ever dreamed.

While I had read plenty of literature over the years about the importance of self-care in one's spiritual journey, it was an amazing blessing to journey to the Taize Community. It gave me permission to invest in my own pilgrimage and renewed the joy I find from following my own vocational path.

H. Richard Niebuhr described pilgrims as “persons in motion, passing through territories not their own, seeking something we might call completion, or perhaps the word clarity will do as well: a goal to which only spirit’s compass points the way.” In my opinion that’s not a bad way of describing the Church. Here at First Church, we have dedicated ourselves to being a spiritual center in West Hartford. We strive to see in all people a reflection of God’s image, and we welcome all who wish to join us as fellow pilgrims. Regardless of how traditional we may look, we are a people on the move and in the process of becoming.

The word pilgrim is rooted in the Latin adjective *peregrinus*, a combination of *per*, meaning through, and *ager*, meaning field or country. A pilgrim by definition is a person on a journey. Through Christ’s living spirit, let us keep moving.

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