

The Way

Luke 10:11-32

Rev. Alida Ward

A long weekend is always nice, but this one is especially nice for me -- my parents are here for a visit, all the way from Charlottesville, Virginia -- they arrived on Amtrak last night just in time to watch for us to watch the Virginia-Carolina game together; we're all rabid fans of U.Va. basketball. (last night did not go well, however. We don't want to talk about it.)

You've heard me tell a lot of stories about my parents over the years. And most of the stories you've heard have to do with what is their passion, which is walking.

I don't mean strolling around the block, although they're happy to do that. I mean like walking from one side of England to the other side, which they've done. Or from the south coast of Wales up to the north.

16 years ago now, my siblings and I accompanied them on the West Highland Way, which winds a hundred miles through the Scottish highlands.

The trek was beautiful, it was inspiring -- it was also really embarrassing because, frankly, the three "kids" had a hard time keeping up with our much-more-in-shape parents. On the last morning, in fact, and I am not proud of this, I suggested that we see about getting a taxi for the last 14 miles.

It was raining, and my feet hurt.

That, of course, didn't happen --

and I have the picture of all of us, soaked, bedraggled, and proud, at the end of the walk.

I was glad we didn't get that cab.

The farthest I've walked since then is across the Stop and Shop parking lot, but my folks haven't stopped -- next walk is planned for August.

And very recently, they did something pretty cool -- they walked the famed Camino de Santiago,

the ancient pilgrimage way across northern Spain
to the Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela.
St. James the Great, one of Jesus' 12 disciples, is buried there --
and since the tenth century hundreds of thousands of the faithful
have journeyed each year to worship at his shrine.
So all along the way of the pilgrims,
over the centuries, villages grew up,
churches were built, inns and hostels to shelter the travelers.
And to this day the pilgrims come -- like Jennifer and Thann Ward from Virginia.
My mom sent us beautiful pictures from along the way --
crosses by the side of the path, from ancient carvings
to sticks bound together --
farmers waving to the passers-by,
shepherds coaxing their flocks past the line of pilgrims.
And at the end of it all, the soaring spires of the cathedral,
and a line of pilgrims making their way inside to hug the statue of St. James,
in gratitude and no doubt relief at having made it.
Pretty cool for my parents to walk in the footsteps of millions of the faithful.

A few years back, there was a beautiful movie made called, simply, 'The Way,'
about the Camino de Santiago.
In it, Martin Sheen plays a father who decides to make the pilgrimage
after losing his son;
it was his son's dream to walk the Camino,
so his father does it in his honor,
carrying the profound grief of having lost his child,
and the overwhelming guilt of having been estranged while he was alive.
And along the way, along the pilgrim way,
something happens --
the father journeys from profound sorrow and loneliness
into healing, and community, and renewed faith in a God who loves him.
His pilgrimage becomes not only a journey to ...
but a journey back.

The Bible is full of stories of journeys.

Abraham and Sarah leave the land of their ancestors and start walking, just because God tells them to.

Moses leads his people out of Egypt on a long, long journey to the Promised Land.

Paul leaves Jerusalem to journey all over the Middle East to tell people about Jesus.

But the journey in the scripture passage that I had [Grace][Samantha] read to you is the journey of one lonely, hurting, and very needy young man known ever since as the Prodigal Son.

The parable of the prodigal son may be the most well-known of all the stories Jesus ever told.

Jesus never gave names to the characters he created, because he wanted you to be able to imagine that it was you he was talking about.

So all he said is that there was a family with two kids in it.

And one of the kids decides that he could do just fine on his own, probably better than fine.

So he asks his dad for all of his allowance up front, all his inheritance, and he heads off to the big city.

'Cause who needs dad, really, who needs home.

And you know what happens.

All the plans fall apart, all the money runs out,

he has to hire himself out as the guy who cleans pig pens.

And he's hurting. And he's lonely.

And he needs help and he's ashamed to realize he needs help.

And one of the hardest journeys of the Bible is the one that young man makes next --

the journey *back*.

The journey back home.

You know what happens next. His dad is so happy to see him.

It's one of the most beautiful lines of the Bible, one of the most beautiful lines anywhere -- it says,

"While he was still far off,

his father saw him and was filled with compassion;

he ran, and put his arms around him and kissed him."

And welcomed him home. No questions asked: welcomed him home.

There was a reason, of course, that Jesus told the story.

Because he knew how often we're the ones out there wandering around, thinking we could do just fine on our own.

And what he was saying was

"when you finally figure it out,

when you finally get that you need some help,

when you finally turn yourself around, and start that pilgrimage home,

God's the one who sees you from far off,

God's the one who shortens your journey by running to meet you."

I've been thinking about this story a lot.

I think this story is kind of important for us.

And I think that because the world in which we live is just a *bit* unsettling.

As perhaps you've noticed.

In the words of the ancient curse, may you live in interesting times, and we do.

It can be as scary for us living out there as it was for the prodigal son on his own.

And it seems to me that in the midst of unsettling times,

the best thing for us to do is to take our cue *from* the prodigal son

and go home. Go back home.

I don't mean go to your room,

put a blanket over your head, and never go on Facebook again.

Although that might not be a bad idea.

What I really mean is that we need to remember why Jesus told this story in the first place.

It was to remind us that we're nuts if we think we can do this all by ourselves.

That we need to realize -- like the prodigal son finally did -- that this craziness called life can't be done solo, that you actually need pretty constant reminders that there is one who loves you -- we'll call that one God.

That you need a home where you are fed and held and comforted and strengthened. Let's call that church.

That you need to be reminded of what is good and what is true and what is lasting. And that -- we'll call faith.

What I'm saying is that whenever we wander off and feel overwhelmed, whenever we are out there running out of our own resources, the best thing we can do is turn ourselves around and make that journey home. To God.

There's a writer I've mentioned before up here, Nadia Bolz-Weber.

Actually, she's secondarily a writer -- what she really is is one heck of a preacher and pastor.

She's the Lutheran minister I told you about who started a church out in Denver called The House for All Sinners and Saints.

And she, like all of us, is some of both.

She grew up in a fundamentalist church, which she left in her teen years -- "left with a vengeance," as she says.

The next decade of her life involved an unsuccessful attempt at college, bouncing from job to job, doing some stand-up comedy, and spiraling downwards into drug and alcohol addiction.

Eventually she found herself back in church, St. Paul's Lutheran Church -- not in the **pews**, but in the basement, where their AA meetings were held.

And that began her journey home, back to a God who came and met her on the way.

Now she leads a church whose doors are open to everyone, everyone, everyone who needs a way home, everyone who needs to be reminded that there is One who loves us, everyone who needs strength for living.

Everyone who needs a place to remember who they are and whose they are.
Everyone seeking grace.

I'm going to close by telling you about a special place,
a place where I've spent my last four New Year's days.
It's a church in a town called Jamalapuram,
a tiny town way out in the middle of nowhere, in the beauty of rural India.
I've preached in that church each of the last four New Years Days.
But actually that's misleading -- where I've preached is not **in** the church,
but on the field in front of the church.
That's because on New Year's day so many people come
that we don't fit in the church, which is half the size of our memorial room.
It's like Easter and Christmas combined --
And that's because, for the Christians there,
New year's day is the day you're meant to come home to God.
It's the day you remind yourself of who you are and whose you are,
the day you gather with your sisters and brothers in faith
and celebrate that you are loved,
and pray for the time to come,
and go back out strengthened by grace.

And so , as I'm standing there speaking,
what I'm seeing in front of me is people streaming in from every direction --
people from the neighboring village making their way in by foot --
and others who come from much further away, squeezed into three wheeled auto
rickshaws -- we saw 16 people spill out of those rickshaws this year.
Others climb down off the bus that stops on the main road .
Over the hours that we are together,
people just keep arriving, pilgrims at the end of *their* pilgrimage,
the faithful making their journey of, sometimes, many many miles.

All there for the same reason that pilgrims have traveled for centuries to a
cathedral in Spain,
the same reason the prodigal son journeyed home,

the same reason people stream into the House for all Sinners and Saints,
the same reason we are here:

to remember that they are loved.

To be in a place where mercy and compassion abound,
and to remember how to **be** compassionate, merciful people.

To be embraced by grace,
to gather up strength for the journeys yet to come.

So I'm saying that we're all pilgrims -- and prodigals.

We all have a place we need to get to, and get to often.

We all need to find our way home, again and again and again.

To be able to live grace-fully, hope-fully, faith-fully in this world of ours,
we need home.

We need to get ourselves into the presence of God, who sees us from afar and
loves us,

who holds us and strengthens us and reminds us of what is good.

That's what church is. That's what church is meant to be.

This place where we encounter a God who has been waiting for us with open
arms.

This place, this gathering,

where we remember how deeply we are loved, and we remember how to love.

This place we pilgrims make our way to,

To find all that we need for the living of these days.