

Fellow Pilgrims on a Journey

October 1, 2006

On top of a high hill in Turkey,
Above the ruins of the ancient city of Ephesus
There is a shrine to Mary, the mother of Jesus.
It is thought that after the death of her son,
Mary was taken for safety away from Jerusalem by John
High on this hillside, she lived in a small house.
Nearby is a well that still flows with good water
Our tour group went there that sunny afternoon
And found the shrine crowded with pilgrims.
Most of us joined the line-up to enter the small, rather dark chapel.
The line moved slowly.
Inside, there were icons or pictures of Mary on the walls.
Many pilgrims were lighting candles and saying prayers
Before these icons.
At the front, a priest oversaw the procession of pilgrims.
Slowly we moved through the space
And eventually out again into the bright light.
Nearby was a fence – chain link I think –
Where countless people had tied small pieces of cloth
Containing their prayers.
People were from all over, it seemed.
Some were Catholic, others Orthodox, crossing themselves as they prayed.
Many were Muslim, coming to pay their respects to Mary
about whom there is more said in the Quran than in the New Testament.
Some of these were school children –
School children with instamatic cameras!
Pilgrim children who asked, in their very best English,
If they could please take our pictures!
It was a wonderful moment of reversal for me and my fellow travellers.
We had spent almost two weeks taking pictures of Turkish people
We had met along the journey.
Now these Turkish children returned the honour
By asking to take our photos!
I wonder what they told their parents and teachers
About us when the pictures were developed!
Fellow pilgrims on a journey, captured in Kodak moments.

Pilgrimage is a spiritual practise with deep roots.
As long as there have been holy places,
Humans have spent time and energy going to those places.
It was common in medieval Europe, to go on pilgrimage to the Holy land
And today many Christians from North America make that journey.
We are becoming familiar with the five pillars of Islam,

one of which is to make the pilgrimage to Mecca once during one's lifetime if possible.
Our roots in the Reformation make a trip to Germany or Iona Scotland a pilgrimage.
Or we may long to go to Coventry cathedral or
Chartres in France to walk the famous labyrinth.
The practise of walking a labyrinth is a kind of mini-pilgrimage
As we walk toward a destination
Aware that the path is a windy one and that we find ourselves
Having to trust – the path, our fellow pilgrims, God.

A large part of being a pilgrim, though,
is not only reaching the destination.
It is our encounters along the way with others
who seek a common goal of deeper intimacy with the Holy.
It is rare that all our travel companions are people we would choose.
and even those companions we do seek out
can be irritating and annoying after many days of living /on the road/ out of a suitcase.
Sometimes we may find ourselves questioning their motives
for being on this trip –
their holiness is not obvious to us!

Jesus and John had a conversation one day.
John was questioning a healer who had the audacity to cast out demons
In the name of Jesus
Even though he was not a follower.
“We tried to stop him,” John told Jesus.
He expected Jesus' thanks, I expect.
What he got was a surprise!
“Do not stop him;” Jesus replied,
“for no one who does a deed of power
in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.
Whoever is not against us is for us.”
We may share John's surprise.
It seems like Jesus should be able to control
Who speaks and heals in his name.
Like the Disney corporation watching like a hawk
For violations of its copyright,
Surely Jesus should care that strangers not take his name in vain.
But that's not how Jesus saw things.
It seems that what he cared most about
Was that people were being healed by the exorcist.
And perhaps he thought that if the exorcist used the name
Of Jesus to effect healing, he would turn his heart toward Jesus.
John did not need to use his energy trying to protect
Or control access to divine healing.
The exorcist, like him, was a pilgrim on the journey.
Though they didn't know one another,

They were on the road together.

Today we celebrate communion with fellow Christians
Around the world.

We are many different expressions of Christianity;
Often we question how things are done by others
And whether they are really as faithful as we are
Often, in the North American context,
We compete with one another for the hearts of people.
Jesus' words to John about the exorcist
seem ones that we can take to heart:
"No one who does a deed of power in my name
will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.
Whoever is not against us is for us."

Instead, Mark's collection of Jesus' sayings goes on
to urge us to be less concerned about the faithfulness of our fellow pilgrims
and more self-reflective.

It is so easy to look for the splinter in another person's eye
while being oblivious to the log in our own.
There are many things in our own lives that can cause us to stumble.
Our hand, our foot, our eye...
Cut them off, Jesus says, dramatically.
It's better to enter the kingdom of heaven with only one
than to have two of each and be thrown into hell.
What good to us is an eye that cannot see
or that sees the world only with cynicism and despair?

There once was a gifted cancer surgeon named Josh
who came to a counsellor suffering from depression.
In spite of his brilliance and success as a surgeon
he could barely make himself get out of bed most mornings.
Every day he heard the same complaints, saw the same diseases.
He no longer cared. He wanted a new life.
The surgeon who had helped so many have a new life, longed for that himself.
The writer Proust said that the journey of discovery lies not in seeking new vistas
But in having new eyes.
Sitting with the despairing surgeon, the counsellor asked him
To spend fifteen minutes at the end of each day
Asking three questions and writing down the answers:
What surprised me today?
What moved me or touched me today?
What inspired me today?
The surgeon, reminded that it was less expensive than Prozac,
Went away.
Three days later he phoned in irritation.

“I’ve tried this for three days and the answers are always the same:
Nothing. Nothing and nothing. Is there a trick to this?”

The counsellor laughed.

“Perhaps you are still looking at your life the old ways,” she said.

“Try looking at the people around you as if you were a novelist, a journalist,
or maybe a poet. Look for the stories.”

For several weeks at their session, Josh did not mention the journal.

But then, six weeks later, he brought in a little bound book

And began to talk about his journey.

It was a difficult journey at first.

He wondered how he could be so busy and living such an empty life.

But slowly he had begun to find some answers to the three questions.

At first the most surprising thing in a day was that a cancer
had grown or shrunk two or three millimetres,

and the most inspiring thing was that a new or experimental drug had begun to work.

But gradually he began to see more deeply.

Eventually he saw people who had found their way through great pain

and darkness by following a thread of love,

people who had sacrificed parts of their bodies to affirm the value of being alive,

people who had found ways to triumph over pain, suffering and even death.

At first Josh would only notice things late at night as he spent time with the questions.

It was like being in a fairy tale under a spell

where he only saw life by looking backwards over his shoulder.

But gradually the lag time became shorter and shorter.

And then, he became aware of surprise, and feeling and inspiration

As they happened – in real time.

“I think when I began to see things differently,

my attitude began to change.

Maybe that showed in my tone of voice or in some other way.

People seemed to pick up on it because their attitude seemed changed, too.

And after a while, I just began talking to people about more than their cancer

And its treatment. I began talking about what I could see.”

One day a thirty-eight-year-old woman with ovarian cancer

Who had undergone major abdominal surgery

Followed by difficult chemotherapy.

In the midst of a routine follow-up visit one morning

He suddenly saw her for the first time,

Her four-year old on her lap and his six-year-old leaning against her chair.

Both little girls were shiny clean, well fed, happy and obviously well loved.

Aware of the profound suffering caused by her sort of chemotherapy,

He was deeply moved by the depth of her commitment to mother her children,

And for the first time he connected it to the strength of her will to live.

After they spoke of her symptoms, he commented on this:

“You are such a great mother to your kids,” Josh told her.

“Even after all you have been through, there is something very strong in you. I think that power could maybe heal you someday.”

She smiled at him,

and he realized with a shock that he had never seen her smile before.

“Thank you,” she told him warmly. “That means a lot to me.”

Encouraged by her response,

Josh began to ask other people one or two questions he had not been taught to ask in medical school.

“What has sustained you in dealing with this illness?”

or “Where do you find your strength?”

He found people with the same disease had very different things to say.

Things he really wanted to hear about.

In some way, what they said was true for him, too,

as he struggled to deal with the difficulties of his own life.

“I knew cancer very well, but I did not know people before,” he said.

He found that people were now thanking him for their surgery

And some had given him gifts.

After a few moments of silence,

he brought out of his pocket a beautiful stethoscope engraved with his name.

He showed the counsellor, obviously moved.

“And what do you do with that, Josh,” she asked.

He looked puzzled for a moment and then laughed out loud.

“I listen hearts,” he said. “I listen to hearts!”

Most of us lead more meaningful lives than we know.

Often finding meaning is not about doing things differently:

it is about seeing familiar things in new ways.

Most of us meet people who are also on a pilgrimage through life.

Often meeting them soul to soul is not about doing things differently:

it is about seeing familiar faces in new ways.

Jesus could be right :

when we can see others with grace and compassion

we may be able to see ourselves with new eyes.

Maimed, stumbling, partly blinded we may be

but we are more whole and lovely than ever in God’s eyes.

(Story of “Finding New Eyes” from My Grandfather’s Blessings
by Rachel Naomi Remen)

Rev. Diane Blanchard

