

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Trust”
Sunday, March 3, 2019 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “The faith of free persons must tangibly make them free in a community of human dignity and equal justice.”

- James Luther Adams, 1901 – 1994

Sermon “Journeying Together” Rev. Paul Sprecher

I got a call yesterday from my cousin Betsy yesterday. As in many extended families, we don't talk often enough. This call was motivated by the news that another of our cousins was dying and indeed did die by the end of the day. She also wanted to acknowledge my birthday of a few weeks ago – as I had hers six months ago. She's had an extraordinary life as a translator of Buddhist texts and as a teacher, but more notably as the co-director and one of the founders of the Tibetan Nuns Project, a non-profit organization founded more than 30 years ago to educate and support female Buddhist monastics in India from all Tibetan Buddhist lineages. It supports over 700 nuns interested in study and higher ordination at seven nunneries, and has been a pioneer in promoting equality for women in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.ⁱ For more than 25 years, Betsy made her home in Dharamsala, India, where the Dalai Lama also lives in exile.

Thinking about today's service using our March theme of “Journey,” I asked if she considered herself a pilgrim to India. Actually, she said, she considered herself more of a nomad. I asked if there were any holy sites that she revered. The one she felt most drawn to was Bodh Gaya and specifically to the bodhi tree

under which it is said that the Buddha achieved enlightenment. That site seemed to her to have some quality of sacredness that made her want to go back again after two previous visits.

The tradition of pilgrimage has ancient origins. Holy sites exist all over the world, places where a particular kind of sacredness draws people away from their ordinary lives to commune in some fashion with places of miracle and mystery and strange power – places of personal revelation and reorientation. One of the best known is the Islamic Hajj, the Greater Pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca. One of the five pillars of Islam is the injunction that every observant Muslim should make this pilgrimage at least once during their lifetime. Like many holy sites, the Kaaba is said to date back to ancient times. The Quran says that it was built – or perhaps even then rebuilt – under divine orders by Abraham and Ishmael, his first-born son. By the time of Mohammed, it had become a polytheistic shrine with images and tokens of many tribal gods. When Mohammed returned in triumph to Mecca after defeating his enemies, one of his first actions was to purge the Kaaba of all symbols of other gods and to declare that the ancient site was to be a shrine to Allah, the one god. In 2017, more than two million three hundred and fifty thousand pilgrims from all around the world participated in the Hajj.

I made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land seven years ago with my dear friend Rabbi Shira Joseph and members of her synagogue, another friend who is an

Episcopal priest with members of his congregation, and a small group of Unitarian Universalists from various congregations. We went to many sites considered sacred in Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition. One of the curious features, especially of the Christian shrines, was that multiple places laid claim to being *the* site of particular events in the life of Jesus. Thus, the traditional site of the crucifixion and burial was established during the reign of the Emperor Constantine around 330 CE at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Protestant pilgrims in the late 1800's felt that such a gaudy church could hardly be the site of the most sacred events in Christian history and discovered a burial cave outside Jerusalem that they came to believe was the true site of the burial and resurrection of Jesus. Even the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is contested, divided among four different Christian traditions each laying claim to different parts. Riots have broken out in the Church if so much as the leg of a chair was moved to the wrong side of a dividing line. For centuries, the four groups so distrusted each other that they would only allow a Muslim to hold the key to their sacred space.

As we traveled, we encountered numerous such contested places – two churches of the Annunciation, one Greek Orthodox, the other Roman Catholic; at least four sites along the Jordan River that claimed to be the place where Jesus was baptized and so on. Those of us who were skeptics were struck by the fact that it would never be possible to know for sure where particular events had

occurred; those of us who were pilgrims were content to experience the sacredness of each and every one of these sites, hallowed by generations of pilgrims before them.

Pilgrimage in most traditions is a way of stepping out of our ordinary daily life into sacred space and time, a way of experiencing our lives in the context of the eternal as we leave the mundane behind. Pilgrimage is also a way of leaving old ways and places behind and moving to new places that promise more freedom, more inspiration and more opportunity. Such was the experience of the Pilgrims who founded Plymouth, for example, seeking religious freedom even at the risk of their lives – and many died on the way – but also seeking the more mundane and sometimes murderous opportunity to have better material lives, albeit at the cost of taking over the land and not infrequently destroying the lives of the Native Americans who had preceded them. The dream of the Pilgrims was to establish a City on a Hill that would be a place of righteousness, a shining example of possibility for the rest of the world. They felt that they were following the example of the Israelites as they ventured forth to a new Promised Land for themselves.

Such pilgrim journeys offer the opportunity to reorient our lives by traveling from an ordinary place to an extraordinary place. But, in a larger sense, our whole lives are a pilgrimage from the cradle to the grave.

Some religious traditions emphasize this notion more than others. I referred in my column in *Bridging* this month to a hymn I grew up with, “This World Is not my Home” by Jim Reeves. I can remember singing it to myself as I walked around the fields on the farm we lived on until I was ten:

This world is not my home I'm just a passing through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore
Oh lord you know I have no friend like you
If heaven's not my home then lord what will I do
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.ⁱⁱ

The song has a lively tune and I would find it coming into my head unbidden. What I came to realize at an early age, though, is that the image of our whole lives as a brief pilgrimage from eternity to eternity omits the question of how to live our lives in the here and now. If our whole orientation is toward a future destination at the end of our lives, how ought we to live this life? I later came to realize that the same question haunts the centrality of being Born Again in the tradition in which I grew up. I don't in any way want to deny that lives can be changed by such an experience – we see examples all around us. But very soon we get back to the question of how to continue with the ordinary work of every

day life. The real question remains: “Now what?” At the end of the pilgrimage to a holy place or after our lives are transformed, we return to ordinary time and again face the question of how to live these years that we are given? What examples do we follow, how do we get through the day, the week, the decades, our whole lives?

The members of my Friday interfaith study group with Rabbi Shira and others in Hingham are currently working our way through the Jewish text *Pirke Avot* or *The Wisdom of the Fathers*. [Two rabbis, two Episcopalians, two Unitarian Universalists plus a Baptist and a Lutheran pastor walk into a Chinese restaurant....] This week’s verse by Rabban Gamliel says, “Treat God’s will as if it were your will, and God will treat your will as if it were God’s will.” Ever the skeptic, I ask, “How do we know what God’s will *is*?” There are many conflicts among people based on what they believe God’s will to be. Radical Islamists believe they are doing God’s will as do Settlers on the West Bank – but both cannot be right. Protestants and Catholics in Europe waged Holy War against each other with great fervor at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives – each side convinced that it was doing the will of God. Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural address said, “Both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.” Both, he concludes, cannot be right. Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz, whose commentary we are reading along with the text, says “Of course, none of us will ever know the true

inner workings of the mind of God. We can only approximate responses based on studying the ancient texts, our intuition, and opening our hearts to the winds of the spirit.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Rev. Catherine Cullen, our UU minister in Duxbury who has recently joined our study group, identifies herself with the Buddhist tradition. For her, the *sangha*, the community of Buddhists who gather together, is one of the most important sources of wisdom for how we know how to lead our lives. Treating God’s will as our own – however we understand God, not to mention God’s will – requires study and great care and the voice of our conscience, but it also requires community. We need companions on every pilgrimage we take, as of the pilgrimage of our lives themselves. Our closing hymn, “Blue Boat Home,” speaks of “Drifting here with my ship’s companions, all we kindred pilgrim souls.”

Sometimes we take time out for a special pilgrimage to reawaken our sense of the sacred, that other dimension of living that is all too easy to lose track of. Always we are on a journey, and for that journey we need companions. We here are companions to each other, caring for each other, helping each other, sometimes offering feedback to help us journey more peacefully and with more insight. This place is sacred. Each week we make pilgrimage to this sacred place to remind ourselves of our highest aspirations and to companion each other on this journey of life from its beginning to its end. It is for this reason that we

support this congregation with our time, treasure and talent. It is in this way that we help one another to answer Mary Oliver’s question in her poem “The Summer Day:” “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your wild and precious life?”

We are all on a journey and we all need companions. We are all searching for the right ways to live our lives, ways to spread love and to find fulfillment, ways to discover meaning and purpose in our lives. Ultimately we can never be certain of any of our decisions but we must nevertheless make choices as we explore this world and this life – and in doing so knowing that we are always dependent on our companions.

T. S. Eliot, in the adaptation in our hymnal of “Little Gidding,” says it well:

What we call a beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

AMEN, and Blessed be

ⁱ <https://tnp.org/aboutus/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jimreeves/thisworldisnotmyhome.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz, *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*, New York: Reform Jewish Publishing (CCAR Press), 2018, p. 73.