

WGUMC March 11, 2018 "The Art of Pilgrimage"
Mark 10:17-31

When I hit upon the theme of spiritual pilgrimage for the season of Lent, I ordered myself a book by Phil Cousineau called, "The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred." In that book, Cousineau tells lots of stories about his and others' travels, and he gives practical advice on how to turn any journey into a pilgrimage.

I recommend the book for anyone who loves to travel, but there is another book you probably already have that has plenty of advice for the traveler. The Bible is the best-selling guidebook of all time, better than Frommers or Lonely Planet or any of the others. The Bible tells stories of Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and these men were always on the move. Take Jesus. Not only did he travel all over Galilee and Judea, but he was, in essence, a tour director for his disciples. He told them the same thing he tells each one of us: "Follow me." In other words, "Join me on the journey."

So we're going to try to glean from our Scripture today what wisdom we can for this journey called Life. And since the Village House has dominated this church's life for the past month, I also have some reflections on our guests and their journeys, too.

The passage in Mark begins with the words, "As he was setting out on a journey...." It does not say where he was headed, but later we learn that Jesus was "on the road, going up to Jerusalem," and we all know what happened there. [Mark 10:32] Jesus was on his way to meet his destiny, a spiritual journey if there ever was one. But before he took his first step, he was confronted by a question. A man, a rich man, ran up to him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

That got me thinking, "Doesn't every journey begin with a question?" Admittedly, most of our journeys begin with pretty superficial questions: how long will it take to get there? What

will the traffic be like on the way and what the weather or the food or accommodations be like when we arrive? Those are the questions that concern us on most days. But if you want to turn a journey into a pilgrimage, you're going to have to start with a bigger question.

Jesus starts his journey with the biggest question of them all: what must we do to inherit eternal life? And that's really what his journey is all about, isn't it? What happens to Jesus when he gets to Jerusalem answers the question: what must Jesus do so that we can inherit eternal life.

As we've seen in the last several weeks, the women who are in the Village House program have lots of big questions: Where can I be safe? Whom can I trust? How can I heal my hurts? Will I ever have a home? And unlike the rich man in the story, these poor women can't fool themselves into thinking that their money and possessions are going to give them an answer to those questions.

The women have to learn the hard way Jesus' advice for the journey, and one of the first things they have to learn is how to travel lightly. Jesus sent out his disciples with an order to take nothing with them except a staff and some sandals; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, not even a spare tunic.

[Mark 6:8-9]

Village House is a little more lenient, but not much. The women have to get everything they need into a plastic foot locker, a suitcase and a backpack, which they will tell you is an extremely hard and anxiety-producing challenge, because their stuff is like a security blanket just like the blankets on their bed.

Now I can assure you that Woodhaven was not cold at night, but some of the women had half a dozen blankets on their bed. Sitting on their cots, wrapped in their blankies, they looked like baby birds in a nest, or lying down, like caterpillars in a cocoon. And I realized that these blankets were necessary not to make them feel warm but to make them feel safe.

Hopefully, the safe they feel, the easier it will be to let go, for every time they transition to another church, they have to get rid of things they have accumulated over the past month, things they don't really need and can't use and just complicate the journey. We would all benefit from traveling lightly, living simply.

As Reese Witherspoon's character in the movie "Wild" learned, you can't carry all that baggage with you. As she set out to hike the Pacific Crest Trail, she learned that you have to let go of big chunks of your life and lose yourself in order to find yourself.

I confess that I am one of those who over-packs whenever I go on a trip. I want to be prepared for anything. But if we are so afraid that we might not have what we need, if we take everything we own, we're not really leaving home, are we? We may miss out on what's new and strange and wonderful. We may never have the chance to be this someone different

that we could be. For better or worse, the women of Village House can't bring home with them, so they are all on a journey of self-discovery.

Jesus tried to teach the rich man that he didn't need all of his stuff. But he couldn't part with it. The Village House women didn't choose to give up their stuff. They didn't choose to go on this journey. But since Jesus is going with them, they too are discovering that relationships are more important than possessions.

Which leads me to a second lesson the women are learning: don't travel alone. Jesus sent his disciples out two by two because when you are heading out into the unknown you need someone who will look out for you. When the women come into the program, they don't know anyone. But after eating, sleeping and hanging out together practically 24-7, they get to know each other really well, too well. Like sisters who have to share a bedroom and bathroom, they get on each

other's nerves. But also, like sisters, they have each other's back.

Some of the women have difficult personalities. Some of them have complicated medical histories. All of them are under a great deal of stress, and it often spills over. So they all have daily opportunities to practice forgiveness. And in the process, they are getting better and better acquainted with Jesus.

When one of them has a birthday or gets a job interview or finds permanent housing, she now has a sisterhood to help her celebrate it.

Sadly, it was not so for the rich man in Mark. When Jesus invited him on the journey and told him the cost of discipleship, the rich man wasn't willing to pay it. Because he couldn't go along, he went home alone, every step taking him farther and farther away from the life he was seeking.

The women of Village House are learning that they don't need their possessions nearly as much as they need their

people. They are learning something else that is very important, too, and it came to my mind as I was praying this passage on the labyrinth last week. I was at a church in a very upscale neighborhood on the peninsula, thinking about how Jesus told the rich man that, though he had many things, there was "one thing" he didn't have.

I wondered what that one thing could be. Perhaps it was trust in God. Like a lot of residents in Silicon Valley, the man trusted in his money more than he did in his God, but money won't get you into God's kingdom. On the other hand, maybe what he was lacking was compassion for the poor. The rich man was clearly more concerned with his own well-being than with other people's suffering, which is why Jesus goes on to tell the story about the camel and the eye of a needle. Wealth is a big stumbling block on the road to the kingdom of God and the only thing that can clear it away is showing compassion for the poor. As the story about the last judgment in Matthew

shows us, all Jesus has to do in order to know if we are fit for eternal life is to ask one of "the least of these" how we treated them. Or, as James Forbes, the former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, used to say, "No one gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor."

So both trust and compassion are essential. But neither of these are lacking in the Village House women. They trust in God because they have to, because of what they've been through. Even now, every month they are thrust into an new situation at a new church. The only reason they can trust us to love them is because God loved them first. They have little else they can put their trust in.

We've also seen their compassion. One night, an older woman arrived from the hospital, and it didn't take long for everyone to realize that she was very, very ill. Members of the shelter team were nervous about being responsible for such a fragile guest, but the other women jumped right in to take care

of her. Linda Yepiz watched as they helped this woman out of bed. They patiently waited for her to take a shower. They helped her walk over to Wesley for dinner. They brought her some water and some tissues. They held her hand. As Linda says, "It was beautiful."

So as I was meditating on "the one thing lacking" for these women, a powerful truth came to me. The truth is that none of us are lacking what we need to inherit eternal life, because God has already given it to us. The Bible says that God gave us life and breathed into us a living soul. [Genesis 2] God taught us to walk, led us with cords of kindness, bands of love. [Hosea 11] When we went astray, God brought us back, redeemed us, and called us by name. We belong to God. That's how we know that when we pass through the waters, God will be with us, and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm us. When we walk through fire, we will not be burned. The flame

will not consume us. Because, God says, "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." [Isaiah 43]

This is the good news we tried to bring to our Village House guests. If the women lack anything, it is the same thing that so many of us are lacking: the faith to believe that we are loved more than we could ever know or imagine, that there is no place God wouldn't go, no price God wouldn't pay, no pain God wouldn't suffer to give each and every one of us the life we are longing for. And it is right here waiting for us. We don't have to be healthy. We don't have to be wealthy. We don't have to have it all together in order to have it.

This life is our birthright, our inheritance. But we may never know we have it until we think we've lost it. Going on a pilgrimage can help us find it again, but it is something of an art. It takes practice to know how to travel lightly and in good company, how to trust in God more than in money, and how to care for the poor more than for our possessions. This journey

will take a long, long time, a lifetime. By God's grace, at the end of it, we will find what was always ours from the beginning. So what must we do to inherit eternal life? Simple, Jesus says, "Follow me."