

WGUMC March 18, 2018 "Life is a Labyrinth"

Yesterday was Saint Patrick's Day. I've never paid much attention to the holiday, which seems strange considering my name. The truth is that my father has not been able to trace his ancestors back to Ireland. But I went on a retreat a few weeks ago, led by John Philip Newell, who is a scholar of Celtic Christianity, and he inspired me to reclaim my heritage, so this year I celebrate Saint Patrick's Day.

Did you know that Patrick was born in what is now Scotland? His father was a deacon in the church, but Patrick was not much of a believer. At the age of 16, he was captured by pirates and taken to Ireland. Enslaved for the next six years, Patrick had plenty of time to pray. Working as a shepherd, he came to love the Good Shepherd more and more. He prayed upwards of a hundred times a day. He would spend the night in the woods and on the mountains, rising before dawn in snow

and ice and rain, the Spirit burning in him, keeping him warm.

[from Saint Patrick's *Confessio*]

One day Patrick heard a voice calling him home. So he managed to escape from his captors, travel 200 miles to the nearest port and convince a ship's captain to take him back to Britain. He walked 28 days to get home, nearly starving along the way.

A few years later, Patrick had a vision and in that vision he saw a man carrying many letters and on one of those letters were the words, "The Voice of the Irish." Patrick writes, "As I began the letter, I imagined in that moment that I heard the voice of those very people who were near the wood of Foclut, which is beside the western sea—and they cried out, as with one voice: "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us." And the rest, they say, is history.

I thought of Saint Patrick as I pondered the prodigal son, and the thing that strikes me is how different people in

different circumstances can find themselves on the same journey. These two very different stories contain the same truth: that we have to leave home to really come home. We have to lose our selves to find our true self, just as we have to lose our misconceptions about God to encounter the true God.

The younger son in our story didn't really know his father or appreciate him. He only looked to his father when he wanted something and as soon as he got it, he ran away. A lot of us start out thinking of God in the same way. As children, we are taught to give thanks to God because God gives us stuff. We thank God for food, family, and friends.

But a "gimme" God won't sustain us as we grow up. Sooner or later, we find ourselves in a place where God's absence is felt much more than God's presence. Our inheritance runs out and our strength gets used up and we fall on our beds at night not wanting the morning to come. If life is

a journey, it can feel like a forced march we didn't sign up for, a solo trek to the South Pole that we didn't train for.

Often we get tired of the journey. Stephanie Liljedahl is tired of the word "journey," and when I began soliciting pilgrimage stories, our resident doula sent me this:

The word "journey" used to be woven into almost every class I taught or parent I supported. We would talk about how everything is a journey and the birth of the babe was just one part. In my world now, that word has become so tiresome to me.

If you want to call life a journey, then it looks to Stephanie less like a road and more like a labyrinth.

If I'm feeling especially melancholy I picture a cloverleaf of labyrinths. Where there is a call, a change, and we find ourselves in the midst of whatever unknown we need to face that day. Where we walk, catapulted, stumble in to a labyrinth and a new journey has begun...I have had "journeys" of depression. Of Bells Palsy. Of falling in love. And of divorce. The birth of The Butter Churn, and the saying goodbye of it. Having children and watching them grow up. The melancholy of it all is in realizing that within the framework of one journey, once that piece is more complete, there is just another waiting. Thus the cloverleaf image that I am sometimes drawn to.

For Stephanie, stumbling along the labyrinth is tiring.

On some days it's too much. And it feels too much. And I want some reassurance that we won't always be journeying. That maybe, sometimes we can just "be," for a little bit. I want to rage against the journey, the never-ending traveling and just be home. Put my bags down and be done with yet another life lesson that threatens to break me. This would be an easy place to talk about God and how being with God will be the time where I get to lay everything down. Or to take the slant and say that with God, s/he carries the weight of my bags and makes those loads lighter. Honestly though—right now.... I don't know where God is in any of this. My relationship with God feels fairly non-existent. Irreverently, if God is my travel agent for all these journeys....I'm feeling like all I get is voicemail for a mailbox that no one checks.

If we were all as honest as Stephanie, I think a lot of us would confess to feeling the same at times about our own labyrinthine journeys. There is in all of us a son or daughter who is tired of all the twists and turns of traveling on the road. And like the prodigal son, we are tired of being hungry and begging for pig slop. We just want to go home, put our bags down and be done.

Jesus says that when the prodigal son had suffered enough he *came to himself*. Likewise, when Patrick had prayed enough, he heard a voice calling him home to himself. And that

is exactly what happens to me, every time I walk a labyrinth. I hear a voice calling me home to myself.

Yesterday I drove to San Francisco to walk the labyrinth at Grace Cathedral. With the light streaming in through the stained glass windows and the organ playing, I began to meditate on the self I needed to come home to. Not the self I want to be, not the self that anyone thinks I ought to be or the self that after cancer I can no longer be, but the self that I really, truly am, right now, the one with all of its unfinished business, unfulfilled potential, unacknowledged gifts, unaccepted grace.

When I thought about that self, what came to me was a picture of a big open field. Can you see it? Imagine that on one side of that field are all your different selves lined up: the many false selves you pine to be or pretend to be or get pressured to be along with your one true self. And on the other side of the field, at a great distance, is God, tears of joy streaming

down, arms stretched open wide, running to greet you. But God is not coming for your phony selves. No, your Mother God is passing right by all your prettied-up selves, so that she can throw her everlasting arms around your authentic, actual self. It is that tired, broken, bloodied, over-burdened and laid-bare self that your Father God so passionately loves and wants to wrap up in his great, big tender heart and carry home.

For a moment, I came to my true self. And then I was able to catch just a glimpse of a truer God. Not the gimme God that we like to pray to, but the take-me God that we come home to, the God who takes us out of our false self and into our true self, out of our pretend life and into real life, out of our sin and suffering and self pity and into forgiveness and healing and glory. The God I find on the labyrinth is always a surprise to me, always a mercy. This is the only God who has ever given me any hope for my journey. So I end with Katharine

Whitcomb's "Invitation to the Labyrinth," which I think is a pretty good rendition of God's invitation to life:

“Invitation to the Labyrinth” by Katharine Whitcomb

Let the heartsick, let the empty,
let the searching come. Let the hopeless,
let the blissful, let the forsaken come.

When the days unspool one dark reel after
another, come. When sorrow haunts
the corners of the house, when the hours stack
like dirty plates, when solitude
becomes loneliness, come to the labyrinth.
Do not wait, in joy or in misery for God
to descend. Do not wait to be found.
Bring the heavy freight of your life here
And set it down. Lay aside your regret.
Step to the gate, beloved, place your feet
on the path. In the kaleidoscope,
inside the mandala, on the trails that lead
to the heart of the Rose, all are welcome.
Brother, sister, grandmother, friend,
all ages, all faiths and all people can
walk the path together, all can
allow the noise of the world to recede.
There is no right way or wrong.
Walk in prayer, walk in silence, dance
skip or sing. Walk inside yourself.
Come into the Mystery, come to the Holy
Spirit, the greening power of God
where the soul blossoms and dreams
burst into full flower. Let the fearful,

let the angry, let the abandoned come.
Let the fulfilled, let the faithless,
let the merciful come. When good fortune
tastes of bitterness, when self-hatred erupts,
when there is no comfort, come
to the labyrinth. Come to remember yourself.
Come and move toward the Light.
Come in pain, in confusion,
come in reverence and celebration.
Be welcomed and be healed.