

PRACTICAL PROBLEMS OF PILGRIMAGE

Somewhere along the line, no matter how enthusiastic we get about the Faith, the Kingdom, the church, or God's presence with us, we come face-to-face with the realization that we cannot keep up with all of the dimensions of the Pilgrimage, no matter how hard we try or how much we might want to.

Sometimes I have suspected that moments of such awareness are more dangerous than many of the more obvious "slippery places" of the Faith. We think of trials, temptations, sorrows, defeats, sin, and evil as being our most serious opponents. Many times it does seem that Satan gets more mileage out of a well-timed ball game or the desire to sleep in than he does from his more famous arsenal of weapons. And this realization that we are never going to "get it done right" or live up to all our expectations sometimes seems to do more to destroy hope and faith than all our more obvious enemies. The impact is more subtle, but in the long run it may be more devastating.

Such things come under the category of the "practical problems of Pilgrimage." Time, space, communication, expectation. We live in a temporal realm. Nothing is perfect here. Nothing is ever finished here. Everything must be tempered with patience, understanding, forgiveness, and hope for that which cannot yet be.

Faith chooses patience instead of cynicism. It seeks the possible – the realistic expectation – without ever cutting back the dream. It lives and works for the high purpose and the final goal, knowing all the way that time and space and communication will hold it all back. That is part of the Pilgrimage – the practical part. My purpose today is to remind us to stay "free" – not from the practical, but from the things we do to make the practical unbearable. And what we do is this: We add guilt, frustration, and fear to the practical problems that hold us back. Then the problems seem to be unbearable. Guilt, frustration, and fear put a great big magnifying glass in front of all the problems. Through such lenses the problems look enormous.

The Pilgrimage is good – practical problems included – if we do not go negative into guilt, frustration, and fear. Perfectionism is the negative key. I give you a new definition of hypocrisy: A hypocrite is one who expects perfection, from self or from others. A *Pilgrim* is one who journeys toward a far-off goal. If we are perfect, we need no journey. If the goal is close, the journey is but a few steps away and

one superhuman effort will bring us to completion. A hypocrite is one who does not yet realize that the Journey is forever. A hypocrite, then, is not consciously dishonest – saying one thing and doing another. A hypocrite keeps getting surprised by the depth and breadth of things. A hypocrite thinks he is close to completion – acts and talks like it – when the reality is still eons away.

Jesus Christ came to free us for the Journey. The love and acceptance of God which Christ revealed is what makes the Journey bearable – and, more than that, joyful. Faith means we have to throw away the fear and guilt. Faith means the perfectionism has to go. Faith trades perfectionism for Pilgrimage.

That was the sermon. I hope you heard it. I hope I heard it too. But that was it. Now we can go back and chat about some of the details. I have trouble keeping it clear and remembering it, and so do some of you. Some are *determined* to feel guilty. For instance, some think that's what a sermon is for – to make us feel bad so we will try harder. So if I preach – even about forgiveness – some come out of the worship service saying, “Boy, you really got to me today. I feel really guilty about the way I haven't accepted God's forgiveness.” What can anybody do with *that*?

God cannot do much with our guilt, except for that first touch that may lead to greater honesty and to repentance. But guilt itself is a killer. What God *can* use is our love, our faith, our joy, our hope, and our enthusiasm. Have you ever noticed what happens when we put guilt and enthusiasm in the same room together?

So I am not trying to increase our guilt, only our awareness. One of the practical problems of Pilgrimage is communication. In terms of personal Pilgrimage, the key is prayer. God needs to be in communication with the people, or God's leadership is cut to vague influence. We talk about that a lot around here (from the pulpit, in Disciple Bands, at prayer retreats), and I will not be getting into it today except as a reminder of the importance of communication.

When it comes to the areas in which Pilgrimage can be shared – that is, when it comes to the life of the church – communication is always one of the biggest practical problems. Paul is talking about it in the passage we just read: “*If the bugle gives an indistinct sound*” – if musical notes mark no definite interval, if people speak in tongues of ecstasy that no one else can understand – then the church cannot

move; no progress can be made; each person is an isolated island and there are no bridges.

It is a strange topic for Holy Scripture, we might think at first. It is a strange topic to discuss in a sermon. But communication is a constant hassle in the life of the church. It takes up hours of time and energy in board and committee meetings and in congregational meetings. The majority of our troubles with each other come from misunderstanding, rumor, innuendo. It is a constant struggle to make it possible for everyone to know at least the basic information about what is going on. Yet no week goes by without painful reminders that some information did not get through in one place or another. We do as well as most churches, actually better than most, and yes we live in an imperfect world. But is there no better way?

This is not about guilt, remember? We are not talking about the past. We are talking about the future. What could/would our church be like if planning and communication became a serious part of every member's conscious responsibility?

While we are on the subject, our Annual Meeting is coming up – an important time in the life of the church. Learning to discuss, disagree, and decide – and still remember Christian affection – is one of the things “church” is all about; it is one of the skills Christians are supposed to learn. Some people were annoyed with me for recently mentioning “making new enemies” as well as friends. And maybe my tongue was in my cheek. But that is a fear most of us carry within us, and some people stay away because of that fear. They do not want to take the risk of getting upset. We say to ourselves, “I don't need that.” But we *do* need that! What happens when the Holy Spirit hits us with a serious and important mission, issue, or challenge? What happens to us then if we are not in training; if we have not practiced; if we have not learned to handle things together? We never know at the time which issues will end up being serious and important.

Do we also remember that when Christians come together, we are not meeting to push our own opinions or to “win” the church to our way of thinking? We gather to try to discern together what God's will is for us at the present time, in our actual situation. We listen and speak with that as our primary aim. For us, democracy is not just majority rule. Democracy is a way to give the Holy Spirit the option of speaking through any or all of us until all of us feel we have a glimmer of what God is asking of us.

Let's move on to some of the other practical problems of Pilgrimage: time, space, and expectation. God's ways are mysterious, and we often link religious ideas with magic and miracle. But mostly God's creation is orderly and has pattern. God is a process God – a careful and incredibly intricate Designer. Things work according to laws, principles – step-by-step, level-by-level. There is progress, evolution – dimension after dimension – awareness expanding. That is how we grow and learn. Even conversion, dramatic as it often is, is not the beginning or the completion of anything. It is the end of an old trail that is not going anywhere – and the beginning of a new Pilgrimage.

We find ourselves in a temporal realm. Everything is limited by time and space. Nothing is perfect. All things come to an end. Everything is hemmed in by death. That is the border of our known reality. God gives us freedom – a true opportunity to learn and to know Life from our own experience and our own choices and involvement. God influences when we allow it, but for the most part God refuses to interfere. We are free to hurt each other or to help each other. We often wish God would reach down and stop what we or our neighbors are doing. But that would mean the freedom is false, and then we would not truly learn.

So this world is a true training ground – a boot camp for the realms to come. There is a lot of suffering in the process of learning. Much of it is self-inflicted, or inflicted by others who are also still learning. Yet there is a safeguard: death. There is a cutoff point. Things cannot get too far out of hand. There is no mistake that God cannot fix. The pain cannot get beyond a certain level. Stupidity, ignorance, or evil can only go so far before it starts to self-destruct. A temporal realm bordered by death is what guarantees that. It's funny how we complain most about the greatest safety factor. Our spirits/souls are designed for an eternal realm, but first they “try on” life in a controlled environment called “earth,” where the mistakes and chaos can be corrected, where the damage can be terminated.

What I am working up to is this: We are not expected to make it through this realm without mistakes. This entire realm we call earth is designed for mistakes. If we expect ourselves to be perfect – if we hate ourselves each time it is clear that we are not – then we do not understand where we are, who we are, or what is going on. God's promised forgiveness is not just a spiritual first-aid kit, in case we

have an accident. It is the primary principle upon which our world – our whole experience – is based. It is not handy, *if* needed; it is the central meaning and truth surrounding our very existence. The most essential truth of the Pilgrimage is to know God’s forgiveness – to claim it and to trust it – and in that trust, to learn to forgive ourselves and then others. Perfectionism will stop the Journey. It is too heavy to carry for five feet down the Pilgrim’s Road. So why are we so afraid of mistakes? Why are we so spiritually unadventurous? Why are we so terribly rigid and frigid over being “right” or “safe” or “acceptable”?

What is the meaning of the phrase “good Christian”? As in, “I want to be a good Christian.” We are not content to be merely a Christian – one who believes and trusts in God’s personal love. We expect more than that from ourselves, or we think God expects more. So we must try to be a “good Christian” – a perfect, saintly being. Do you know why we are not?

We have excuses and reasons, some we probably need to keep taking to heart: we do not stay faithful to our prayers; we are willful, self-centered, ignorant, tempted, etc. But there is another reason: we do not live in a realm where “perfect” is possible. To be a good Christian, we would have to live in a realm without limitations. The practical problems are that we cannot be everywhere at once; we cannot keep up with everything; we cannot always be understood. That is where most of our guilt and sorrow and frustration and fear come from. And how Satan works and uses it – until we surrender the perfectionism and start depending on the Holy Spirit to help us, asking, “Where do You want me to be? Doing what? Saying what? When?” and then claim forgiveness for all that does not work out and all that does not get done.

Many people need our caring. A good Christian is always a caring person. Can any of us be everywhere at once? Even if we could be, do any of us have the capacity to keep caring energy at full flow twenty-four hours a day every day for years and years? There is no way anyone can be a good Christian. Claim God’s forgiveness and forgive yourself, and try being content with just being a plain old everyday Christian: one who trusts in the mercy and love of God, and each day does what the Holy Spirit seems to point you toward. Of course, it will not be enough, and it will not all get done or done well enough. But we know that ahead of time. That’s the way it is here. But it’s all right because we are not expected to *be* God – just to love and worship God.

Christians help the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the needy. If we want to be good Christians, we feel guilty all the time because we do not do enough of those things. Does our guilt help anybody? Do we have unlimited funds? A good Christian has to have unlimited funds because somebody is always hungry or sick or lying beaten by the side of the road.

Christians talk about their faith a good deal and share their spiritual experiences with those who are interested. But a good Christian knows that every person needs to hear the Word of God preached and, after hearing it, every hearer should be deeply and immediately converted. Do you know what it's like to be around somebody who thinks and talks like that? A plain old everyday Christian will do just fine – will do some good and will do some harm – but will go on walking the Pilgrim's Road in God's forgiveness.

Being a good Christian pretends that we are not sinners and that we do not live in a temporal, limited world. It pretends that we can be perfect. The truth is that good Christians produce more guilt faster than all the blood of Jesus and the Cross and all the Easers ever since can keep up with.

Of course, we all want to do more and be better. That's what it means to be in love. With love, nothing is ever enough. The hunger to give is overwhelming. And when the love is for God, we put a little "ten" by it – carry it to the tenth power. And that is the way it will always be, for all of us, from now on. Once on the Pilgrim's Journey, it is never enough; there is never enough time, money, love, energy, wisdom, or faith. When we love God, we can never give enough. Get used to it. Claim the waiting forgiveness. Forgive yourself. Forgive others wherever and however they are struggling. It is the central truth and the essential ingredient of any genuine Spiritual Path.

So we need to stop trying to be good Christians. They are the enemies and destroyers of the Kingdom. Being a plain old everyday Christian is just right – all that is requested, offered, or required. In that stance and humble acceptance, we can go on facing the practical problems of Pilgrimage with enthusiasm and in joy.