

TOGETHER IN THE JOURNEY
Sermon for Pentecost 4A (Proper 8)-Mt 10:40-42
LPC, 7/2/17

I have a friend named Mark who is currently walking the Camino de Santiago, sending back pictures to Facebook everyday which show his progress from Southern France and across northern Spain.

The Camino is one of the oldest, most popular pilgrimage routes in Europe and leads to the cathedral where the relics of St. James the Apostle supposedly reside. Though in the Middle Ages pilgrims undertook the voyage for penitential reasons, nowadays faithful people tend to make the trip as a spiritual exercise: in other words, to deepen their faith rather than specifically to atone for sin.

I had the privilege of walking one hundred kilometers of this trail in 2004 with fifteen high-schoolers and four other adult leaders. Despite the distractions of dealing with the inevitable adolescent issues that arose, it was a profoundly spiritual experience. The journey toward this great shrine truly came to represent for me the Christian's life-journey toward closer relationship with God. There is something genuinely purifying of being on the trail for several days with the sole object of reaching a holy destination.

When I and my group were preparing for the trip, we were told an interesting story. At one time it was common that people you encountered along the way going about their daily business, would, upon finding that you were a pilgrim, give you their blessing, so that you could take their prayers with you to the holy shrine. In this way they too participated in your devotional efforts even without making the trip. You came to make the trip not only for yourself, but also on behalf of the people you passed along the way.

Regretfully, I was never approached by a local who asked me to carry her prayers on my trip in '04, but the idea has stayed with me. It is a concept of considerable comfort and grace: that all Christians are sufficiently connected that the kingdom efforts of one person are somehow shared by those unable to make them. I certainly feel as if I am somehow on pilgrimage with my friend Mark.

The connections between the individual members of the Body of Christ can hardly be overemphasized in this individualistic age. Christians probably encounter this concept of interconnection most commonly in the context of sharing joys and sorrows.

We see this microcosmically in the local church community, here at Lawrencefield. People in this church rejoice with each other, throwing showers and parties and having cakes made for each other in times of celebration. People in this church close ranks in times of illness and sorrow, caring, calling, sending cards, praying for each other.

Further, we are connected with people outside the walls of this church. We see this at Lawrencefield in our annual collection of personal items and cosmetics for the YWCA, or our special collections of funds for things like HealthRight or Flood Relief meet with a generous

response. I know that most of you do not confine your efforts to help other people to what we do in church.

There is always more to be done. The health crisis of substance abuse in our state, for example, cries out for a Christian response. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. Feeling guilty about what you *should* do is pointless. Don't do that. Discern what you will do, and do that. This is the substance of prayer.

Our connectedness as Christians in prayer and sorrow is commonly preached. Less commonly these days do we hear about our connectedness in sin. Our culture discourages the idea of corporate responsibility for sin. Most of us bristle at the idea that we bear any responsibility at all for the wrong-doing of others.

But the life and teaching of Jesus profoundly challenges the self-righteous, Pharisaical approach of separating ourselves from those we consider unworthy or unclean. Jesus' willingness to connect with and identify with sinners is one of the most challenging parts of his message, because it represents an invitation to us to do the same.

We are also one body in the mission of the church. This point speaks to my sense of identification with Mark's pilgrimage. As fellow citizens of the kingdom of God we participate with each other's efforts in building the kingdom of God. That is part of what St. Matthew is saying in today's Gospel lesson when he says that whoever welcomes a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.

Matthew's Gospel was written for a community in which members had different callings. Some were itinerant missionaries and some were settled disciples. What Matthew calls "prophets" seems to be a class of disciples with a specific function within the church. But in terms of the rewards they can expect, they are no more blessed than the people Matthew calls "little ones." Little ones here are not children, but what New Testament scholar Eugene Boring calls "'ordinary' Christians."

The homely example of giving a cup of cold water emphasizes the point that any act of kindness or goodness done as a disciple of Jesus Christ, no matter how small or ordinary, is as great in the kingdom as a huge philanthropic gift, a rigorous holy pilgrimage, or an heroically saintly act.

This is good news to little ones, ordinary Christians like you or me. The point is not the size of the gift, but the fact of discipleship. Professor Boring says that when Matthew uses the words, "In the name of" he is employing a Semitic expression meaning, "because one is." Even small acts done *because one is* a disciple, that is, in the love of Christ, are as rewardable in the kingdom of heaven as great ones.

That is because, as disciples, we are all part of one another. We are part of great pilgrimages, and we are part of great charitable works. And the saints are part of our small efforts, our pats on the back, our words of love and encouragement, our cups of cool water.

We are together on the journey. We are one in Christ.