

## **The Reluctant Pilgrim: The Familiar Strangers**

First this morning a word of apology – Jesus said, if a brother or sister has something against you, go and be reconciled before you eat together. During the sermon yesterday, it was pointed out to me by some of you that I, in some way, represented Mary of Magdala in a way that was not exactly Biblical, that I implied that she was a person of the streets. In no way do I wish to contribute to stereotypes of any persons, and my apologies to Mary and to Mary's community.

Mr. Kitter reminded us yesterday that the universal epoch includes honesty, respect, fairness, responsibility, and compassion, and in my judgment we owe that not simply to the contemporary community in which we live, but also to the community of saints, to be honest with who they are.

We have begun a journey, a pilgrimage, what I am calling a spiritual pilgrimage as we seek to explore the way the human encounters the Holy, and the way the Holy engages in a process of transforming the human. We began with Moses, the one who's burning passion for the oppressed drove him from home, the one who had a passion that would not be settled by simply sitting still, the one who had a burning heart that would not be eased with Pepcid-Ac.

We have listened and conversed with Moses and then with Mary, who when her home was destroyed, continued to seek the presence of Jesus in the places that she considered sacred, in the presence of sacred memory, who stayed with that memory long enough to hear her name called and to be reminded of who she was, to stay with it long enough for recognition. While Mary was in the garden, she met God in the gardener and was graced by her name being spoken by one who was a familiar stranger.

If you seek a spiritual pilgrimage, you will leave home, and you will discover that there are those along the way who once were familiar, who may at some time have become strangers to you. But on that pilgrimage you will also find a lot of strangers, and according to our heritage, we are to welcome the stranger, because the stranger may be a messenger from the Divine. Strangers are those who teach us something about ourselves that we may not know.

When I began this particular part of the pilgrimage of my life, I enjoyed going among strangers. I enjoyed traveling to places that I had never been. I remember one day getting an email from the Dean of the Seminary not long after I had arrived. He sent an email to all the faculty, and it said, “Would any one of you be able to leave in three weeks and go to Fiji to represent this school at an international meeting?” I thought about it for about three seconds and responded, “I’ll go.” I had an advantage over many of my colleagues, because I was on a pilgrimage. I was not burdened with a lot of the responsibilities that those who had been around the place a long time had, and my family was not in need of my being present with them, and I was free to travel.

I was in a meeting once where a novelist made this statement, “When we are writing novels, we frequently go out among strangers, because it is said we discover who *we* are among strangers.” The pilgrimage of faith is one where we meet many a stranger on this road of reluctant pilgrims, strangers who teach us about ourselves. But it is not easy to welcome strangers for frequently we feel as if they might be enemies. They might threaten our self-understanding. When we are out in strange places, it is very, very difficult for us to feel secure enough to engage the stranger. When we are outside of the ritual safety of our own space, we become nervous about those people who are different from us.

When I was traveling in Vietnam and Cambodia in the mid-eighties on a peace mission for the church, I remember getting on an airplane – and I’d gotten on a lot of airplanes in my life – but I remember getting on an airplane in Hanoi to fly to Phnom Penh, Cambodia. We got on the airplane, and we filled all the seats, and then in the aisle there were people sitting on boxes, and there were people sitting on boxes that had chickens in them. I sat down and was a little nervous by the fact that people were not buckled in and waited for the announcement, “Please pay attention to the person in the aisle, and here’s how you make a seatbelt work” – an announcement I had heard many times and ignored most of them, but I wanted that announcement and wanted to see what was going to happen. Well, the announcement never came. I was really nervous, because somehow, I was outside the realm of security and safety. This is the way you fly. This is familiar. This is home in an airplane, and this airplane was not home.

We get nervous among strangers, and often, we close down in their presence. Often, when we feel threatened, when we are outside of our realm of safety, we feel threatened by these people and begin to push them away. I have been struck by many of the feelings in myself and what I have read and heard from other people after the World Trade Center collapsed and the Pentagon was penetrated. I hear people say, “We’ve got to take those people who are different and separate ourselves from them. We have to protect ourselves from those people who are different.”

We are frightened people, because that which we have trusted has been violated, and now all who look different feel as if they might be threatening enemies. I listen to that, and then I remember Jesus who said, “Love your enemies,” because it is the stranger who may even be your enemy who teaches you who you are.

To be on a pilgrimage is to be among strangers. Jacob knew that. Jacob was on a pilgrimage, you will remember. He was on a pilgrimage to visit his brother, the stranger, the one whom he had not seen for years, the one whom he had violated. He was going to see his brother, the stranger. He was going to a sacred place, a sacred memory, the memory of his family. He was going to meet his brother in this place of terror and hope and love and longing, a brother who was a stranger.

And on his way, he encountered another stranger. Left alone across the river from his family, he met a stranger in the night. I’m struck by how many times these messages from God come to people in the night, in the dark. He encountered a stranger in the dark, a stranger with whom he contended. I’m convinced that to discover the Divine in the journey of the pilgrimage of life, one must spend a good bit of time wrestling in the dark. These wrestling matches of our lives come to us in spaces where we cannot see clearly, the stranger with whom we struggle.

We do not know our fears. We can’t name why it is we are unsettled or feel frightened. Somehow it is dark around us, and a whole lot of the struggle of the pilgrimage of the soul is in the dark. It is in the dark with those people, those characters of our own soul whom we do not know.

Jacob wrestled with a stranger, someone he did not know. And the remarkable thing to me is Jacob did not run from this stranger. Jacob did not try to hide behind some fortress to protect himself from this night terror. He wrestled with it. He engaged in it.

The stranger even wanted to run from Jacob, and Jacob said, “No! No! No! Do not leave me until you bless me!”

Is there a word to those of us who wake up in the middle of the night at 2:00 and can't go back to sleep? Are we like Jacob being given the gift of the strangers with whom we can struggle – strangers who will not let us go, strangers we will not let go until we are blessed? I know there's a lot of people who believe that that kind of night struggle is counter-productive. I tried to tell myself that a lot in the nights of my life, that it is counter-productive to keep obsessing about something, but sometimes obsessions are the sacred that simply is too powerful until it is unpacked and wrestled to the ground.

We are told that Jacob wrestled with this dark night until the night blessed him. In the journey of life, there are people who will tell you to just get over you, who will turn on the light when you are sitting in the dark and say, “See, isn't this an incredible world? Quit sitting in the dark.” There are people who will tell you, “Give up your passion for painting. Give up your desire to dance. Give up that drive to sing to the heavens. Give it up! Give it up!” and you keep hanging on and wrestling, because somehow it is the passion of your life – hanging on until it blesses you.

Do not let anyone convince you and try to force you into the light when you are still wrestling in the night. When you try to come into the light too soon, it looks fake. It's like the WWF on television. There's nothing at all real except the fantasy.

What is it to be blessed by the stranger? L. E. Biselle in his book, *The Forgotten*, has one of the characters ask, “Tell me about yourself,” to which he responds, “I'm like a book. I cannot read myself. You will have to read me.” Strangers read us and help us see ourselves and bless us, not by getting acquainted with them but by getting acquainted with us.

Jacob wrestled with this dark night and said, “Tell me who you are,” and the stranger would not tell him who he was. The stranger said, “Why do you want to know?” Many times we think our spiritual pilgrimages are pilgrimages for the purpose of finding out who God is, so we can access God on our time. But to wrestle with the Divine is not to find out and domesticate God, but to wrestle with the Divine is to learn what our new name might be.

The stranger said to Jacob, “Why do you want to know?” and then he said, “What’s your name?” He said, “I’m Jacob.” “No longer are you Jacob. Once you’ve been wrestling with God, you have a new name, and the new name for you is Israel, the one who strives with God and prevails.” The pilgrimage of faith is the struggle and the wrestling with God until you get a new name, a new identity, a new passport. A new self-understanding comes from that encounter.

But do not expect that you will leave that encounter dancing. Jacob in his wrestling was struck in the hip, and he went away limping. To encounter the Holy is to be scarred for life with a new identity and a new limp. People outside will know something has happened to you, because you will have something about you that is wounded. You will limp. But on the pilgrimage of faith, one of the things I have discovered is that there is a whole community of limpers out there who are trying to walk carefully into their new name, and it is in that community that we are sustained on this continuing pilgrimage toward home.