

## Tourists and Pilgrims

Nicole Belanus started out June for us with a sermon about journeys. I want to revisit that theme today from a different perspective. First, though, let's look at some things we might need on a spiritual journey.

Today we are gathered here in a place that displays the beauty of God's world. It has some mystical aspects, too. The *American Heritage Dictionary* says "mystical" means, "of, relating to, or stemming from direct communion with ultimate reality or God." When I came up here earlier to find the right pavilion this year, there was a geologist, I guess, on the bridge and I heard him incanting in loud tones over the surface of the lake, "I strongly believe your bottom is composed of sand, silt, gravel, small rocks, and fragments of organic and inorganic material in various stages of decomposition." Then there was sort of a booming sound over the lake and the lake said, "Those are my sediments, exactly." Well, maybe that was a little mystical.

Actually, most of the mysticism found in this place comes not from that mythical story, but from the blood shed nearly 150 years ago by Northern and Southern soldiers in the Civil War, and from the blood shed here by Revolutionary War soldiers, and from that of the early colonists and settlers 150 years before that.

This is truly hallowed ground. Our country, founded in what was called religious freedom in those days was birthed and formed in struggles that rolled over the places we are sitting. Our denomination similarly struggled with its existence here. The Great Awakening, struggles with Methodists and other Arminian sects, various Revival movements, threats to our existence from various groups...these are long stories that bear telling at

other times. Much of the history of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is captured in the eleven documents that make up our Book of Confessions. I want you to think about our history this morning, not in the specific, but in the general. Hold that thought!

The other day I was reading a story about a preacher who was attending a retreat, and was meditating on the shore of a lake on the retreat grounds. As he idly watched the minnows in the shadows, he saw the biggest bass he had ever seen ghost across his field of view, traveling with magnificent power and inducing a V on the lake surface above her. He reported feeling amazement, awe, and a shot of adrenaline excited him. The whole incident lasted about a quarter of a second.

I had a similar feeling a few weeks ago. It was a balmy Monday night, and I had walked home from the small group meeting. I stopped to sit on my front stoop and enjoy the pleasant temperature and the battle of scents between the honeysuckle on one side and a French rose on the other side of the yard. As I sat, quietly thanking God for all of my blessings, I saw a doe deer cautiously tiptoe down my driveway about 20 feet away, look both ways, cross the road, and slip into the ravine on the other side of the road to get some water from the stream there. I experienced the same excitement and amazement, for though I have seen many deer, they were not in my yard, nor were they that close and totally unaware of me.

Maybe you have experienced similar situations, seeing the heads of young birds pop up from a nest, or when you held your first-born, or perhaps any child.

That feeling – that brief, exciting astonishment – was the same one or at least very similar to what we feel when we are exposed to God's presence in worship. I am not sure we are constructed to hold that feeling very long,

but its effects last for a while. This feeling comes when the elements of worship are aligned for you and you realize you are in the presence of God.

I have received that feeling during many of Deborah's sermons, and I know many others of you have, too. I am not guaranteeing you will get that from this worship service today, but I hope some might. If you stay awake, I will have carried out the command Reverend Dail left with me, and for my first sermon, I suppose I will settle for that.

Let's look at one element of worship that is central to experiencing God – prayer. The *Book of Order* says that prayer is at the center of worship. In many churches, though, prayer has become a spectator sport. Some sources classify prayer as public and private. I am not sure why there should be any difference, other than perhaps in the content.

I think one of the reasons Reverend Dail's public prayers are so powerful is that they really are shared communications with God. These are not performance pieces, but further conversations with God, in addition to her own, more private conversations.

Well, what about our personal prayers in church? Do you find your prayer time during the organ prelude satisfying? How many of you enjoy silent prayer times during the service? My experience is that by the time I get wound up to pitch my prayer, the silent prayer is over. It is a characteristic of our culture that at about the 35 second point, people start getting antsy, even when they are inside. I read about one new pastor who started his congregation off with three minutes of silent prayer, unannounced. After the initial discomfort set in, there was eventually some concern that the pastor had suffered a stroke. The church board met immediately after the service, and while the pastor retained his job, he never again held silent prayer without telling the congregation how long it was

going to be. Our culture has taught us to expect immediate rewards, but prayer takes some time. In fact prayer that leads to the knowledge of the presence of God can take quite a bit of time indeed.

Well, so far I have asked you to consider our historical foundations and I have suggested what we might obtain from a worship service, and because I am competing with some pretty luscious food over there, I visited only one aspect of worship, prayer, where we most clearly might be able to meet God. Let's move on to the core of this message.

The first sermon in June was about our Christian journey, and as we say goodbye to June, I would like to revisit that theme. Nicole talked about the journey we are taking and how things changed around us, and what to do with that little voice that says, "Are we there yet?"

I want to carry that theme further and consider our role on that journey. Are we tourists or are we pilgrims? Since you can probably guess the answer I want to hear, let's look at what makes pilgrims different than tourists. First of all, pilgrims are from some place, maybe not the same place, and they bring their histories with them. Tourists may be individuals or families who are traveling on their own; they might join other small groups and fall away. Second, tourists can be going anywhere, but pilgrims are headed for a holy place. That part of the analogy is easy. We all think of Heaven as a Holy place. That makes the analogy easy. If you think of where we position the church in today's society as the holy place, that makes the analogy a bit more difficult, but it still works. Third, Pilgrims share their stories as they are traveling. Some of you may remember reading about that in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, or in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (and if you haven't, that is your assignment for the summer). Those are three

characteristics of pilgrims that differentiate them from tourists: from various places, telling stories as they go, and headed toward a holy destination.

I am reading a book right now, by Diana Butler Bass, called *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith*. This book is based on an extensive survey of 300 mainline – that is, non-evangelical – churches, and extracts the common characteristics of fifty of these churches that are not shrinking and dying. One of the churches in that fifty is a local church.

To encapsulate this book, the churches that are surviving are moving to embrace their communities, to change their communities, and to make Christianity a part of everyday life in those communities. The churches that shriveled first and fastest were those that built walls around themselves, or did not adapt to their changing internal or external environments, or set off on paths that were clearly inappropriate to them.

So the journey is central, not only as we move through human life, but to the church's life. I asked you to keep in mind our history, because as pilgrims it is important to know where we came from. It is important to know who we have been. What are the aspects of faith that make Denbigh Presbyterian different from any other church? We know modern life is changing quickly. Our grandparents welcomed the telephone; our children may not know how to dial a phone, but they can pull one out of their pockets. We need to know where we have been, where we are, and how the currents of life are changing around us, to see which direction we need to travel to get where we are going.

The stories we tell amongst ourselves are also important. We know love is central to our actions as Christians. We have the whole Bible telling us that. Today we heard some of Jesus' longest prayer, in John 17 including

these words at verse 20: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” Jesus’ prayer went unanswered, however – today we have on the order of 34,000 different Christian sects and denominations. What better example of our human failure to carry out God’s plans?

Love is central to our actions as Christians. As we share our stories on our journeys, we will find people who believe differently about worship, about prayer, about theology, about the red herrings of race, gender, evolution, and lifestyle. Church gives us chances to share – to work out our differences is the basic expression of Christ’s love. And that is where all of this was going. If we are going to leave an effective church behind when we end our pilgrimage on Heaven’s shore, we need to practice God’s love among ourselves on the journey. Jesus said it, and you heard it in Jerry Helm’s last sermon, and how we need to hear it again, “Love one another.” (John 13:34)