

## **“PILGRIMAGE: COMPANIONS”**

Matthew 25:34-40; Luke 10:25-37

October 2, 2022 ~ World Communion Sunday

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### *Introduction to scripture:*

Jesus told this story about a man whose journey proved to be difficult and dangerous, the more so as people who were seen and saw themselves as “good people” turned away.

### *Read Luke 10:25-37*

Today Christians around the world, in all our great and fascinating diversity are coming to Christ’s table to receive communion. I love to think about all the different ways that’s happening, in so many places. Bread is being shared – unleavened breads and crusty, homemade baguettes, thin wafers and round loaves embossed with Christian symbols. People are receiving juice, or wine, served up from a common chalice or in little individual cups or even, in some churches, from a spoon.

The Lord’s Supper is being shared in such diverse places as an open-air shelter in Mozambique, an architecturally stunning and technologically state-of-the art sanctuary that seats thousands in Korea, a tiny church along the remote Iceland coast, a soaring cathedral with sunlight streaming through stained glass to cast jewel-like designs on the stone floor. In store-front church in cities, and in chapels surrounded by farm fields. In places where Christianity is the majority faith, and in places where Christians live with persecution. Everywhere we are singing different songs and bringing the prayers that emerge from our different circumstances - in English, Spanish, Arabic, Korean, Russian, Swahili, Quechua, Navajo, German, Mandarin, and a host of other languages. Each person coming to the table, in what is a sort of mini-pilgrimage, coming much as we do: seeking to know God, to follow Jesus, to hear the Spirit’s voice; to be fed, and to deepen (or perhaps *discover*) their faith. We are all, in some way, on the same journey.

Now, if we celebrate that beautiful diversity and enjoy the warm feeling of connection with our sisters and brothers around the world today, we can’t in conscience just leave it at that. If we do, we’ve just made World Communion into another sentimental holiday. Genuine connection compels us to see and honor the scope and diversity of the suffering in these many places around the world as well. This, too is part of that journey we’re all on.

Some of that pain is pain we know and recognize and resonate with, from our own experience. Some of that suffering is beyond our experience or imagining, insulated as we are much of the time; it’s hard to contemplate it. But if we’re serious about World Communion Sunday, we can’t look the other way.

For untold numbers of people, their journey has become one that’s filled with danger, fear, exhaustion, hunger, deprivation, loss, and uncertainty. Some of those people share our Christian faith; all of them are people beloved by God. And for a great many of them, the journey is very

much a literal, physical one. A journey they probably wouldn't have chosen to take. Right now, today, this morning, there are tens of millions of people in our world who have had to flee their homes. They're fleeing poverty and hunger, hurricanes and floods and fires and drought. They're fleeing from violence and war and threats, or from human rights abuses and political, religious, and gender-based oppression.

And for all this, they are frequently met with indifference or blame, with rejection, with insurmountable obstacles, prejudice, hateful rhetoric, and abuse... as the world (and even much of the Christian church) turns away.

Closer to home – in our community as in many communities – our neighbors who don't have secure – or any – housing walk from place to place, move from one temporary residence to another, sleep in cars in the quest for shelter and safety ... and too frequently find that a lot of people don't want to see or encounter them.

As we come to the table where we are welcomed and seen and nourished, where we are connected with Christ and remember all the people to whom Christ connects us... we can't forget the painful and arduous journeys so many are on. This is as much a part of what we're invited into as the blessing we receive from the sacrament. At the table we encounter radical love, radical welcome, radical grace... and our neighbors.

Jesus' story that we call the "Parable of the Good Samaritan" is prompted by the question "who is my neighbor?" The man who asks the question wants to be a good person, and at the same time, he clearly wants to define some limit to who he has to consider as a neighbor. What Jesus offers instead is a story that insists on looking at those questions of what it means to be a good person, and who is and isn't a neighbor, in a completely different way. We tend to point to this story as evidence that Jesus wants us (the more fortunate) to help the needy or the homeless; but there's more to it than that.

The priest and the religious scholar who passed by the injured man may have had good reasons for not helping: They had important and urgent commitments. Stopping could put them at risk too – it was a dangerous road. And as religious leaders, they were expected to observe certain restrictions so they wouldn't be considered ritually impure and thus not permitted to serve in the temple for a period of time. One of those rules forbade touching, and obviously this badly injured man could die. Interestingly, Jesus says nothing about the man; maybe that's part of it too: when you don't know who you're dealing with, it's hard to know whether it's someone who deserves help or a person you shouldn't be associating with.

We might be tempted to hear the story and imagine ourselves in the role of the Samaritan, doing a good deed for a less fortunate person. But to understand what Jesus is saying you have to understand that this story is meant to surprise and challenge and shock. The fact that Jesus makes the true neighbor in his story a Samaritan is important; the people hearing him tell the story would *not* have regarded a person from Samaria as a neighbor, or someone to identify with or emulate or admire. Jesus' story is meant to knock down the barriers and boundaries and borders that we human beings erect to define the limits of our respect and our caring.

It turns out that we should be asking “How can I learn to see everyone as my neighbor?” and “How can I *be* a neighbor?” And maybe also, “How can I see and accept what my neighbor has to offer – even my neighbor who is very different from me?”

When Jesus says, “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was a stranger and you welcomed me... whatever you did for the least of these you did for me,” he is reminding us that people who are suffering and those we look upon as strangers are in fact our companions on our journey. If we are following Jesus, we will encounter them, because where they are is where he is. If we are welcoming Jesus, they will be right there, too.

As our journey brings us, again, to the table, we come, each one of us, to be fed spiritually and to renew our faith. Here we find the kind of welcome that *everyone* would want to find. Here we meet Jesus... and here we also encounter all the other people Jesus loves and welcomes. Here at the table as we break and share the bread we are reminded that ultimately no faith journey is a private pilgrimage. We have companions on this journey. “Companion,” you know, literally means someone you share bread with. And companionship sort of implies an ongoing journey together, a continuing connection.

At the table, we eat, we drink, and we find a bigger perspective. We find our hearts opened to our sisters and brothers and especially to the suffering of those whose journeys are difficult and dangerous. We find that their journeys are entwined with our journeys, and so we can’t forget.

At the table, we hold them in the light of God’s love. We pray for justice and for peace. We pray for strength for all our journeys. Then we are sent from the table to be people who see beyond the boundaries of expectations and tribe, as Jesus did. To see that people who look and think and worship and live differently from us have wisdom and can embody Christ-like compassion. To be courageous enough not to turn away from suffering. To be peace-makers, justice-seekers, neighbors. Amen.