
The Pilgrim's Way

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 7 – Year A

“Do not let me look upon the death of the child,” Hagar cries for her son Ishmael in the wilderness, as he’s dying from thirst, hunger, heat.

This scene has always seemed to me like one from a distant time and place, hardly relevant to us here, today, except perhaps metaphorically. Until I went to Haiti.

Just two weeks ago, twenty-one of us from the Cathedral traveled there on our first mission pilgrimage, under the auspices of an organization called Eternal Hope in Haiti. For over twenty-five years, they’ve provided healthcare and nutritional services to a number of poor, isolated communities in northern Haiti. After spending time with them, Hagar’s words have taken on a new immediacy for me.

“Do not let me look upon the death of the child,” their teams have prayed many times over critically ill children.

“Do not let me look upon the death of *my* child,” desperate parents have cried, as they’ve brought their sick children to the clinics, in the hopes that someone could give them what they could not—medical attention, food, water, clothes. A chance to live.

In response, Eternal Hope opened an orphanage for medically fragile children—children no one else could take, because they had conditions like cerebral palsy, skin disease, AIDS, or severe malnourishment. Some of the children there today are true orphans, whose parents have died. Others are children whose parents gave them up, because they couldn’t take care of them and couldn’t bear to look upon the death of their children.

Our group spent our time at these medical clinics and orphanage sites. It was a lot to take in, we commented often. At times, it was downright overwhelming. It took courage and faith to open our eyes and hearts to all of this—and to keep them open.

In our Gospel these past two weeks, we find ourselves in a section of Matthew called the Mission Discourse. Jesus is sending out his disciples to continue his mission, and warning them about the hardships they’ll face, and encouraging them not to be afraid.

But *how*? I want to know. How are we supposed to deal with—or respond to—what we see, when we go out in Christ’s name, and open our eyes and hearts to the hurts of the world?

My default response is to want to do something, right away. So I analyze the issue, reduce it to something I can understand and manage, and try to fix it.

One problem with this is that it focuses me on what’s wrong, not what’s right. It focuses my attention on what I can do, not on what those most directly affected can do, or are doing already.

Which leads to another problem: it makes it really all about me, doesn’t it? About what *I* can do. How *I* can make a

difference. How I can feel better about what I'm seeing, and drive my sadness and doubt away. Once I've made it all about me, and my needs and time-frame, I'm likely to move too fast. To settle on a short-term, surface solution. To insist on immediate, tangible results that I can see, and feel good about what I've done. All this, without making the real investment of time to listen, learn, and build relationships and partnerships with the people I've come to serve.

In this way, my fixing and doing actually become a strategy for keeping them and their pain at bay. It makes me feel less powerless and more in control. And it gives me permission to leave, when the job is done.

This has been a common pattern in mission and outreach: swooping into some distant, hurting place; working hard for a limited and predetermined time to fix *their* problems; and then leaving. Fortunately, this is changing, as more and more people are recognizing how harmful this pattern can be.

I'm finding it much more helpful to approach mission as a spiritual discipline—in particular, in light of my experience in Haiti, as the practice of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is a purposeful journey, usually to or through holy places, undertaken with the hope of encountering God and being renewed and transformed by that encounter.

This requires a completely different posture from the one I just described. It requires the humility and curiosity of a pilgrim, a seeker, a student. It invites us to recognize that we're already on holy ground, and Christ is already present, wherever we go. It keeps us open to surprise.

I was surprised by God on our mission-pilgrimage to Haiti, many times and in many ways. But perhaps the greatest surprise for me was the people I already knew, from this parish. Just going on the trip to begin with required them to take a huge leap of faith, in our hosts in Haiti, in God, in ourselves, in each other. Some of them knew each other before going; many didn't, or only knew each other from a distance. All of them are very competent in their lives here. But they were willing to become pilgrims there; to surrender control; to give up their own agendas and do whatever was needed, even if it was way out of their comfort zone. Even if it meant not doing anything except being there (which was way out of the comfort zone for many of us!).

I believe they were surprised by the Spirit, too, as they found themselves empowered to do things they probably never imagined, like rubbing medication on a child with scabies, beginning a friendship with a stranger who speaks another language, riding a horse up a mountain, or going a few days without hair product.

This is the last thing I would've expected: to go all the way to Haiti to find God revealed to me so vividly in this group of people from home. But I don't know that we would've gotten to know each other, and ourselves, in this new way without making this pilgrimage—without letting ourselves be so real and vulnerable, and trusting the journey and each other, and seeking God, together.

So I commend the spiritual practice of mission-pilgrimage to you, for all the ways it can grow you in hope and humility, compassion and faith, and for how it can build community.

And remember, you don't really have to go very far. It's more about the pilgrim's posture than where you go. In fact, sometimes, God's greatest surprises are right where you are, already.