

“My Yoke Is Easy And My Burden Is Light”

- I. Introduction: We have taken a pilgrimage, Alex, Andrew, Jessica, Lizzie, McKenzie, Rob, Will, Michael, Peg, Susan, and I. According to the book *Celtic Daily Prayer* (1994), a pilgrimage is a “journeying to a particular place, in the expectation that such a journey will have deep significance. It may be to a place with personal memories, or a holy place where for generations people have prayed and sought God. Everyone’s starting point and journey is different, inside – and outwardly. All kinds of people go on pilgrimage of one sort or another, not all of them believers; it is a chance for things to move, to change, perhaps even for God to break into their lives” (p. 249). So it was, that we began on Sunday June 22nd, not sure of what lay ahead.

Then 7 days later there it was, lying off in the valley, the city of Santiago, Spain. We had been walking, this group of eleven pilgrims from the Church of the Ascension in Knoxville, Tennessee, for almost 123 kilometers, up and down hills, through shady woods, into small and large villages, and over rivers and plains. The Ascension pilgrims had had a very good walk. Our young people had walked together and had walked in solitude. They had kept an eye on us older folks to make sure we were still moving, and they had even pushed us up hills. They had met and befriended pilgrims of all ages from many parts of Europe. The chaperones made it each day to the appointed destination, although often later than the young people. I felt privileged to be a part of this journey, and especially privileged to observe the relationship between Michael Borth and our young people. His connection with them and his leadership were a very important part of our experience.

Now finally, on this last day we reached the Mountain of Joy, the last hill on the Camino de Santiago, over which Christian pilgrims have walked for more than 1000 years. There we were, four kilometers away from our final destination, the Cathedral de Santiago, where each day thousands of pilgrims from many countries come to the noon pilgrims’ mass.

- II. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” But on that Mountain of Joy my particular yoke and my burden felt heavy. This I believe is the way of the pilgrim – sometimes we are carried on the way by the wind of the Holy Spirit at our backs, while at other times pilgrims ache and stumble. During the last few days of walking I had been hurting. I have an old foot injury – a bone fracture that healed incorrectly – sustained during a mission trip to the Dominican Republic. I

had taken anti-inflammatory medication and been advised prior to going on the pilgrimage that if I took periodic breaks I would be able to do the walk. But the longer we walked, the more my foot had swollen and the more painful it became to step on it. So I leaned heavily on the walking stick Bob and Laura Barnes had lent me and took one step at a time. But at times I wondered if I could really complete the walk.

Then on the Mountain of Joy it happened. A young man walked up to us – a stranger. We learned he was an Episcopal transitional deacon who had just been ordained in the Diocese of California and was spending a month in Santiago providing a retreat to pilgrims and spending time with them processing their pilgrimages. He would be in Santiago for July, then go on to Nairobi, Kenya to work with an AIDS hospice and refugees, and finally in September would become Assistant Rector at a church in Honolulu, Hawaii. His intention was to make his deaconate a time of true Christly service, rather than just a way-station to the priesthood. And together, with the rest of our group, we walked into the city. We talked of many things: of our faith, of the church, of David Pena who joined Ascension in 2007 and then went on to study at the Church School of the Pacific where he'd met Michael, and, we talked about what it is like to finish a pilgrimage. As we walked and talked and communed together, my pain – my burden -- lessened. I began to have the unmistakable sense that Christ had sent Michael to bring me and us through the last kilometers of our pilgrimage. He had seemingly come out of nowhere, yet it was clear to me that he had been sent to minister to us. The chaperones had prayed together for God to provide spiritual experiences for our group of pilgrims, but none of us could have predicted God's timing or God's gifts. "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

III. Christ's Presence. But there was more to come. As we neared the Cathedral Square, Deacon Michael asked if we would be willing to let him wash the feet of each of our pilgrims. This was a moment of grace beginning to unfold. Several nights before, we had had Eucharist together on the Camino and our Gospel reading was John 13, describing Jesus washing his disciples' feet. We had spoken of how Jesus the Son of God and his disciples had had a walking ministry, moving on dusty roads from town to town. Jesus had carried out the lowliest task usually reserved for the least of the servants. Christ had washed his apostles' feet, and then charged them to do so for each other. And now Christ had sent a Deacon to do the same for us. After we went into the Cathedral, we gathered in one of the squares outside by a fountain, with hundreds of people walking around us. We re-read John 13, and Michael talked about the hospitality extended to pilgrims along the Camino, which we all had experienced, and the importance of understanding that having finished our pilgrimage, we were now to ex-

tend that hospitality and service to others. Then he washed our tired and dirty feet, first the feet of our youth and then of the chaperones, calling each one of us by name. As I took off my shoes, my socks, and my foot brace, and experienced the cool water washing over my feet, I felt the remarkable power of Christ's presence – my awareness of pain was gone. My eyes filled with tears. My pain had been replaced by a deep spiritual awareness that I had been carried to my destination – the end of this walk – in the arms of God. I was also aware that Christ was present with each of us in the foot washing experience, and, that even as Michael ministered to us, he was feeling gratitude that God had connected him with a group of pilgrims to serve. "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

- IV. Conclusion: What to make of all this? You know I come from an academic background. I have spent many hours learning about science, about research design and research methodology. But matters of faith, matters of grace, and matters of God's timing transcend much of what I am capable of knowing. What I do know is not to try to lean on my own understanding and wisdom. In today's Gospel reading Jesus told the crowd "Wisdom is vindicated by her own deeds." He continued "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." We are asked not to reply upon our own understanding, but rather to place ourselves clearly into God's loving care.

I do not now why and how God breaks into the spaces in our lives at the times that God does. I cannot explain why this Deacon came to us on the Mountain of Joy. But perhaps we do not need to understand or to comprehend it. What we are called upon to do, I believe, is to be open to and accept God's gift, to be reminded of how well God knows us, and then to have the faith to accept Christ at his word when he said that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. For this I say thank you to God, and I share this experience of God's grace with you, so that you too may be encouraged and strengthened in your faith, whatever mountain you are being asked to climb in your own lives. *Amen.*