



Pilgrimage

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

Is it the journey? The destination? The quality of attention sustained on the path? Is the answer to all of these questions a resounding “Yes! And...?” This month, we explore the theme of pilgrimage and pilgrims. We’re invited into an inner and outer journey. One where the spirit propels the body, and the body propels the spirit. A journey where we endeavor to live between where we were, and where we hope to arrive. Pilgrimage invites us to experience the world with awakened senses, in the hope that we might discover something new.

There’s a sense of adventure to pilgrimage. As Bilbo Baggins says to Frodo in *Lord of the Rings*, “It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.” This adventuresome quality is echoed by UU theologian James Luther Adams who described our faith as a “pilgrim church on an adventure of the spirit,” and one can’t help but wonder if he hoped that we might, be swept off to some wonderful, unknown place. Equally, we can’t help but ask how, in our journey together, we keep our “spiritual feet.”

Classically, a pilgrimage is marked by six stages: call, separation, journey, contemplation, encounter, and finally, completion and return. We are propelled into pilgrimage by a sense of call, a yearning for God, a desire for deeper spirituality and personal transformation. If we answer that call, we’re asked to separate from our daily life and community as we begin the process of undertaking the journey. The journey itself is traditionally marked by discomfort, even pain, and some view this physical unease as critically important to the spiritual task of shaking

ourselves loose from the everyday and encountering the world with fresh eyes.

The separation, the journey, and the discomfort all combine to create a place of opening and contemplation. Waking, sore and aching, in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by strangers, perhaps more than a little disoriented, a pilgrim might wonder where they are, how they got there, and what they’ve gotten themselves into. These questions of the spirit lead the pilgrim into a time of contemplation and an opening to answers received from uncommon places. At the heart of the pilgrimage, we discover a changed stance toward how we live and move in the world.

This changed stance, this new-found openness readies the pilgrim for encounter. Whether it’s an encounter with God, with higher truth, or clearer purpose, the pilgrim is changed. Having been witness to a new and larger reality, they cannot ever fully go back to way things were. They have been transformed. And, if pilgrimage is a journey toward transformation, what of the pilgrims themselves?

In U.S. culture, particularly as we draw near Thanksgiving, the term “pilgrim” is so weighted with saccharine images of the “original” Thanksgiving that we need to work hard to engage the notion of pilgrim with fresh eyes. Truth be told, perhaps we shouldn’t move so quickly to dismiss the story of colonists seeking religious freedom who shared a meal of thanksgiving with the indigenous people whose land they occupied. The American myth recasts the Exodus story. It deliberately references the idea that God granted the land to His chosen people. It also references the Doctrine of Discovery. In both cases, it is a story of religious authority granting a people the right to land, and in doing

so, granting permission to displace the indigenous occupants.

Our journey as a pilgrim church is therefore at least partially a journey of reconciliation as we seek answers to the question of how we live lives of integrity, service, and joy on land taken through violence. That inner journey propels our outer journey as we travel to sacred sites with Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs and bear witness to untold histories. This inner journey also propels our outer journey as we work to tell a new story that isn’t grounded in a notion of winners or losers, but instead works to make meaning, in community, of the deep ambiguity of the historical moment we’re in. To paraphrase Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, though few may be directly guilty for the history we’ve inherited, all are responsible for continuing our journey toward wholeness.

So we’re faced with questions about how we keep our “spiritual feet” and continue moving forward, particularly when the next step is unclear, or feels impossible. Pilgrimage, even the solitary ones, are never done in isolation. All who have completed a pilgrimage share stories of the kindness and generosity of fellow travelers who they meet on the way, and the uncommon grace of help from expected people in unexpected places. Perhaps our work is to realize the vision expressed by Wendell Berry who writes that “the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home.”

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