

Finding the Way Home

Hosea 11:1-11

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost/ 31st August 2022

“It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them” (Hos. 11:3-4). The more God called Ephraim, the more we went astray. The more God taught us to walk, the more we insisted on going on our way. The more God provided a safe and nurturing place for us, we pushed away and went into exile. In God’s disappointment, grief, and anger, God considered giving up on us, letting us go our way. “My people are bent on turning away from me” (Hos. 11:7a). But God’s heart recoils. God’s compassion grows warm and tender. God says to Godself, “I will not be like them. I will not come in wrath” (Hos. 11:9). So the Holy One will roar like a lion, and his voice will lead Israel home. Trembling, for sure. But we will be home. Israel, you and I, exiles, all will return home. Exile and return.

The references to walking in this text, to leaving home and returning home, got me thinking again about my experience several years ago walking the Camino de Santiago, the Way of St. James, a 500-mile trek following the ancient pilgrimage route across Spain to Santiago de Compostela. Walking the Camino was a life-changing experience for me. Before walking the Camino, I believed that the Christian life is essentially a journey (or journeys). And this became all the clearer walking the Camino and exploring the importance of pilgrimage.

There are four stages of pilgrimage: summons, departure, getting there, and after getting there, wherever *there* is, there comes a time to return home. One doesn’t stay away forever. One must return. But as we all know, after being on a long journey, after a life-changing experience, we never return home the same. Welsh poet and Anglican priest R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) says it beautifully: *The point of our traveling is not*

*to arrive but to return home
laden with pollen you shall work up
into honey the mind feeds on.*¹

The journey changes us. That’s what it’s supposed to do, change us—which is why the prospect of pilgrimage or journey (whether it’s outward or inward) or simply leaving home (physically and psychologically, spiritually) often generates a lot of anxiety in us. I’m thinking of recent high school graduates who are about to leave home for college. But there are things we only discover about ourselves and our life in Christ after we leave home. We must go away to a strange land, venture out to a strange place, become strangers (which is what the word *pilgrim* means, “stranger” or “foreigner”), maybe even become a stranger to God or for God to become a stranger to us, to discover things about ourselves or about life in Christ, which we would never have known if we stayed home.

I love how Matthew’s gospel tells us that the Magi, after a long journey following a star and their eventual arrival in Bethlehem, were “warned in a dream...[and] left for their country by another road” (Matthew 2:12). They returned by another road. Now, even if they had returned

by the same road, they still would have returned by another road. The former road was not the same road. How could the road be the same? How could anything in their lives remain the same after kneeling before the Lord of Life? You can't go back to life as usual, but only to a new normal. As novelist Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) knew, citing the title of his novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*. Or, if you do go home, like the Magi, it's never the same home that you left. There's no going back. Poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) captures this wisdom in his poem *Journey of the Magi*. The Magi say:

*We returned to our palaces, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation.*²

Yes, there are things you can only discover on the journey. You must leave home to find it. At the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, we find Dorothy Gale of Kansas, who returns to consciousness after getting caught in a tornado. She shares her adventures of being in Oz. Her family and friends don't believe her, and then she says, "If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own back yard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with."³ Because we're told, "There's no place like home." This is one of my favorite movies; it had a huge impact on me as a boy. There's something in Dorothy's sentiment that's true. I used to think this was the point of the story: *it's scary leaving home, so stay home*. But then I realized—decades later—that Dorothy only came to this truth *because* she left home, at least in her dreams, and became a stranger, a pilgrim in the Land of Oz.

It is said that when Marco Polo (1454-1424) and his father Niccolò returned to Venice, they were not recognized because of their tattered traveler's rags. "But inside their tattered clothes were sewn diamonds and jewels from their far-flung journey." The "diamonds," the "jewels" within us, the invaluable insight and wisdom we discover on the journey, is what Phil Cousineau, who has written extensively about pilgrimage, calls "bringing back the boon."⁴ The boon, he says, "is the gift of grace that was passed to us in the heart of our journey." It's what you carry home in your heart from the journey. More than a souvenir, it's a priceless treasure, the Holy Grail you left home to find, that changes how you live when you return.

In the Middle Ages, when you went on pilgrimage, the return home was also part of the journey. I remember visiting, years ago, the undercroft museum of St. Pierre's Cathedral in Geneva and seeing scallop shells, the symbol of the Camino, the Way of St. James, on display. Every pilgrim to Santiago chooses a scallop to carry along the way. These shells were found in the graves of monks—monks who traveled to Santiago and ended up in Geneva. Walking the Camino meant so much to them that they were buried with their scallop shells. Today, after pilgrims or *peregrinos* arrive in Santiago, they catch a train to Madrid and fly home. On the way to Santiago, over a 35-day period, I met only one pilgrim walking toward me. We were all walking in one direction.

Maybe that's why many who've walked the Camino say the one thing they weren't prepared for was the return, the re-entry. It's a tough adjustment. Some become depressed. They miss being on the Camino, Spanish for "way" or "road." They miss being on the way. One of the wisest things said to me before I started walking is that the real Camino, the true pilgrimage begins only after you've reached Santiago, after you've returned *home*. That's when the real journey begins. That was my experience.

The Camino is sometimes called “la ruta de la terapia,” the route of therapy.⁵ The Camino becomes therapeutic, and therapy, from the Greek word *therapeuo*, means “to heal.” Pilgrimage becomes a way of healing. If one returns having been “healed,” a new life begins at home. Returning home might mean coming home to oneself, and once home, you begin to walk a new road, a new way. Maybe you discover why you left in the first place.

Both directly and indirectly, the Hosea text points to the life of faith as a journey. And our journey with God, both as a congregation and individually, is, ultimately, about our *transformation*, about being changed; it’s about the changes that continually occur to us—and should occur to us—as we grow and mature in faith, grow in grace, grow in love. If you’re breathing, if you’re baptized, then you’re on the way. And Love summons you on the way! It’s all for love that the Spirit summons us and sends us off on the journey of our lives.

The thirteenth-century Flemish poet and mystic Hadewijch (1200-1260) understood that it’s love that sends us. She bears witness to “All that the forces of Love urge me to.” Not that Love here is capitalized; she’s talking about God. She also refers to God in the feminine. Hadewijch said, whoever “*dares the wilderness of Love, Shall understand Love: Her coming, her going.*” When Love calls and sends us, courage is required. She writes, “O soul, creature, and noble image, Risk the adventure!”⁶

Love teaches us to walk. And, as we see in Hosea and throughout scripture, sometimes—often?—we walk away from love. But Love, being love, cannot be love without us, without calling us back—despite our waywardness, ingratitude, stubbornness, and desire to go our own way—calling us back home. And if you think about it, if we’re honest, we’re all exiles, people who have left home. Some of us have lost our way and have been exiles for a long time. The spiritual teacher Ram Dass (1931-2019) was correct, I think, when he said, “We’re all just walking each other home.”⁷ While Dass wasn’t a Christian, that’s not a bad definition of the church and what we should be about: walking each other home. We’re each at different stages along that way; some need more help than others, some can walk freely, some are exhausted and tired to the bone, but we’re all trying to get home, to return. As Hosea knew, as Jesus knew, we’re all trying to return to God—who is our *home*.



The Camino de Santiago (The Way of St. James), Spain

¹ R. S. Thomas, "Somewhere," *Collected Poems* (Phoenix, 2000).

² T. S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi," *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 68.

³ L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900).

⁴ Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (Conari Press, 1998), 217.

⁵ Nancy Louise Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 45. See also

⁶ Hadewijch, "The Noble Valiant Heart," cited in Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 92.

⁷ See the book with this title by Ram Dass and Mirabai Starr, *Walking Each Other Home: Conversations on Loving and Dying* (Sounds True, 2018).