

## **Homily – Those We Meet Along the Way**

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One year ago I started my three month sabbatical and departed for Europe to walk five hundred miles across northern Spain. The Camino de Santiago is a pilgrimage hike that has been in use for around a thousand years and while it is very popular with Spaniards, it draws spiritual seekers from around the world. Last year the two nations with the largest number of pilgrims was South Korea and Australia. Last year more than half a million people walked the Camino.

While I was walking the Camino people would ask me what I was learning, and my response was “I don’t know.” When I got back from the Camino and returned to you, I was asked what I had learned, and again I had to say “I don’t know.” I think about the Camino a lot especially the people I met along the way. It has taken a bit of time for me to wrestle with the Camino and perhaps twenty-twenty hindsight was necessary for me to see some things. Here is an example.

This past week we purchased four new tires for one of our cars, and as I was waiting for the tires to be put on I was around others who were also waiting. Two of the men in the room were having a lively conversation, though I think they didn’t know each other. Instead, of joining in, I put in my noise canceling airpods and listened to music. Instead of interacting with others, I went into my own space in the midst of other people. And, in retrospect, I wonder if I missed an opportunity to meet others. On the Camino, if the conversation was in English, I would have joined in on the conversation. Yes, the feeling of community and connection was different on the Camino, but I wonder if I should be bringing back some of the Camino attitude and using it here in California.

I’ve had a few times in my life when the Holy Spirit of God has worked through chance encounters. In those instances, on a whim, I was willing to meet someone new. I was willing to engage with strangers. Some important things in my own life happened in a flash. I could not have predicted them. I could not have made them happen. But somehow at times I am a little more open to the Holy Spirit and life changes for the better.

Today’s Gospel reading is about a chance encounter. The reading is often labeled “the road to Emmaus story.” On the same day that the women found the tomb of Jesus to be empty, two of Jesus’ disciples are walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. We know nothing about these two except that one of them is named Cleopas. We also know these two are not the male or female disciples with whom

Jesus was closest, and the death and resurrection of Jesus had left them feeling despondent and even overwhelmed.

And then, they don't see that God has come into their lives. We are told that "Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." We don't know why they failed to see Jesus, but today, as we read this story we know these disciples have missed something big.

But, we also know they have set themselves up to see God by welcoming the stranger into their midst. Two thousand years ago, hospitality, even while walking along the road, was an important value. These two disciples were friendly with a stranger that starting walking with them. In fact they welcome him, tell him important things that are going on in their lives, and invite him to stop and have a meal with them. And, the disciples are rewarded for their hospitality to a stranger. Their eyes are opened and they see God around them. They see and experience the risen Jesus whom they thought had been taken from them. And, with bursting hearts they immediately turn around and return to Jerusalem to tell the others that God had been in their midst as a stranger.

I don't know about you, but that is an experience I want to have. I want my eyes opened to see our God who is already with us. Far too often, I am like the disciples in the first half of the story. I don't see God who is already blessing me and doing good things in my life. Be that as it may, I want to be like the disciples in the second half of the story. And, if we use today's Gospel reading as a lesson on how to open our eyes, then we see that we must be open to those serendipitous things and people that are already around us.

I've shared this before, but one of the complaints that I used to have about my dad was that he was always talking to strangers. My mother says that my brother, sister, and I used to get so frustrated with my dad when he was talking to someone again. And most of these times we just had to wait as my dad talked to someone he had never met before. As an older, wiser person, I wonder if my dad was on to something.

Here in California we have a culture in which we don't talk to strangers. How often have you been in the grocery store, and someone started to talk to you? I have to admit that far too often I wonder what is wrong with the person, what they want from me, or how I can make them stop talking to me. I miss an opportunity to be in conversation with someone new. I miss an opportunity to see how God may already be working in the world around me. Do you miss these opportunities as well? God is surrounding you with blessings, and opportunities, and people.

Some of us may be looking for new things in our lives. Conversely, some of us may be saying that we can't take on one more thing or that we don't want change. And, some of us are too busy to notice what God is doing around us. If you slow down, notice, and let it happen, then God will do good things in your life and in the life of your loved ones.

Since returning, I was asked "what were some of your favorite places along the Camino." And my reply was that my favorite places were less dependent on location and more based on the people I was with at the time. As I think back I have a deep longing for the connections and community I found on the Camino.

I did not go to the Camino with anyone but I met people along the way that became part of a tribe. Often those of us who formed this tribe would talk over dinner or in the evening about where we were going stop and stay the next day. And, there were at least three common factors amongst the tribe. With only one exception we all spoke very good English. Second, we were mostly staying at the very inexpensive municipal albergues or hostiles that only served pilgrims and wouldn't take reservations. And third, we were each averaging about seventeen miles a day of walking. Back here in California we may think we have little in common with those around us. Or we may think others would not be interested in talking to us or in knowing us. Yes, the Camino has a sense of community, especially amongst the pilgrims who are walking the Way, but what if we could have that same sense here? I think we have that sense of community, that sense of belonging, that sense of welcome here at St. Barnabas. What would happen if we take that sense of community from St. Barnabas into the rest of our week.

In her Book "Church Tomorrow?" Stephanie Spellers writes, "When Apple introduced the iPhone in 2007, they placed the whole of the internet and all its temptations in our back pockets, in the palm of our hands, and on the nightstand, where it's the last thing we see before sleeping and the first thing we touch upon waking. Millennials spend roughly five hours a day online, not counting work. Gen Xers clocked in at four hours; and Boomers are online three hours a day. We only have twenty-four hours in a day, so that's time we're not spending with one another."

Spellers write, "A lot of us want community, but we don't know where to find it. Everyone has access to almost everything they need or want directly on their phone. Everything but connecting to another person in-person. And, the abundance of time alone and on-screen is rewiring our brains. After a period watching TV, surfing the web, or scrolling TikTok alone, when the dopamine wears off, we don't feel refreshed or ready to connect with others. Instead, we crave more "me" time. Brené Brown explains it this way: When we feel isolated, disconnected, and lonely, we try to protect ourselves. In that mode, we want to connect, but our brain is attempting to

override connection with self-protection. That means less empathy, more defensiveness, more numbing, and less sleeping ... Unchecked loneliness fuels continued loneliness by keeping us afraid to reach out. Apparently, instead of emerging from lockdown and rebuilding connections, Americans overall spent more time alone in 2023 than we did in during COVID in 2021. In “The Antisocial Century,” Derek Thompson traces America’s movement from being alone to being lonely to being downright antisocial. We have become more likely to take meetings from home, to shop from home, to be entertained at home, to eat at home, and even to worship at home. Practically the entire economy has reoriented itself to allow Americans to stay within their four walls. This phenomenon cannot be reduced to remote work. It is something far more totalizing—something more like ‘remote life.’ It’s hard to see where religious life fits into this privatized pod, when it’s so much easier to eat, work, read, practice, and pursue spirituality at a distance from other people.”

However, God created us as social creatures. Yes, some energize primarily by being with people and others energize primarily by being alone. There are extroverts and introverts. But we are all meant to be in relationships and in community. I have said it before, but for me, relationships are the core element of spirituality. We were created to be in healthy loving relationships with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation. Our life’s journey, our spiritual journey is based on the quality of the relationships we have in these four dimensions, God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creations. All of us are meant to be in relationships with others, and I don’t think it is the quantity of relationships, but instead the aggregated quality of our relationships. As a church I hope we help you live into the way God has created you, and that is in healthy loving relationships.

One last Camino observation. I was one of the faster walkers, though I wasn’t the fastest. Often I would pass people along the trail or on the sidewalk. And etiquette dictated that as you were about to pass a person you would say “buen Camino” which is Spanish for good walking. This kept someone from being startled by your approach, and if the pathway was narrow then the person often stepped to the side and said “buen Camino” back. Nineteen times out of twenty, I would pass the person or the group, but one time out of twenty I would stop and slow down to meet the person and get to know them a bit. After spending time with them we would usually part ways, and perhaps see each other over the next few days and weeks. I tried to write down names of people with one or two attributes to help me remember something about them. There were more than eighty people that I met which means there were another two thousand people that that I passed by and did not meet. How many do you pass by? Is it nineteen out of twenty or ninety-nine out of a hundred? I wonder about the people who I passed by. I wonder why I decided to slow down and chat with some and not with others. I wonder why some, about a dozen, became part of my tribe and other did not. When we meet people along the way we give and get a

sense of belonging. When we meet people in our day, it is an opportunity to affirm them and share a little more of God's love in a world that sorely needs it. This next week, I wonder how God is putting a Jesus, the stranger, in your path. Embrace the chance encounters as a blessing from God.