
Christian Community and the Pilgrim Way of Lent

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The First Sunday of Lent

*"Eternal Lord of love, behold your church
Walking once more the pilgrim way of Lent,
Led by your cloud by day, by night your fire,
moved by your love and toward your presence bent;
far off yet here""the goal of all desire."*

So writes Thomas Cain (b. 1931) in a poem that is now hymn 149 in our hymnal. "Behold your church walking once more the pilgrim way of Lent , far off yet here , the goal of all desire."

Last week, some of you read with me [an article in *The Wall Street Journal*](#) about a particular desire. Alain de Botton wrote earnestly about something it seems that all people desire: community. Whether we are Christian churchgoers, we desire community. He lauded the Christian Church for its spirit of community.

What was noteworthy about his piece, however, was that he was writing from a non-religious perspective. In his piece, he wondered if perhaps a non-religious society could learn something important about community from the Church. Listen to his words, and remember that they are coming from an admittedly non-religious person:

"Everyone stands to learn something from the ways in which religion delivers sermons, promotes morality, engenders a spirit of community, inspires travel, trains minds and encourages gratitude at the beauty of life. In a world beset by fundamentalists of both the believing and the secular variety, it must be possible to balance a rejection of religious faith with a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts."

Religion serves two central needs that secular society has not been able to meet with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in harmonious communities, despite our deeply-rooted selfish and violent impulses; second, the need to cope with the pain that arises from professional failure, troubled relationships, the death of loved ones and our own decay and demise."
[\("Religion for Everyone," Alain de Botton, *The Wall Street Journal*, February 18, 2012\)](#)

And he asks the question; *can secular society ever recover that spirit [of community] without returning to the theological principles that were entwined with it?* And then he answers: *I, for one, believe that it is possible to reclaim our sense of community""and that we can do so, moreover, without having to build upon a religious foundation.*

That is de Botton speaking, not me. He admires the spirit of community in religions, but he wants to jettison the theological underpinnings of those religions.

His views remind me of what one of my ancestors used to say: "Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die."

Everybody wants to the reward, but no one wants to go through the process "whatever it is" of working toward the reward.

Yes, Christian community is one of the hallmarks of Church life. It defines us. But our community is not simply an end in itself. Our identity is not an end in itself. Rather, our identity "and our community" consists exactly in the religious routines and disciplines that that we engage in season after season.

So it is, that, today, we begin the preparatory and penitential season of Lent. It is meant to prepare us for something, for Easter, yes. But, in a deeper way, it is itself a season that shapes and identifies us.

The forty days of Lent use a forty day pattern that we Christians have read about before: Noah and flood of rain that lasted forty days and forty nights. Moses who spent forty days upon the mountain alone with God. Jesus who spent forty days fasting and praying in the wild.

We Christians eat together, pray together, serve together, laugh and cry together, learn and play together. Yes. And we also walk together. We walk, as Thomas Cain says, "the pilgrim way of Lent." Yes, the pilgrim way will take us somewhere; it will have a destination. But just as importantly, it is the destination. The journey is the destination.

Some of you have heard about the "The Way of St. James." El Camino de Santiago." Having existed for over one thousand years, it is a pilgrimage that traces the route of faithful believers walking their way to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, in Spain, where the bones of St. James are said to have been. But the route, the journey, has become a way for Christians to pray and to walk, to discover God and themselves in a deliberate and intentional way. That's the purpose, probably, of all pilgrimages: not so much to get to one particular place, but to arrive at a spiritual place in the very act of pilgrimage.

When people ask exactly what the route is, and where is the path, they receive as an answer the pilgrim's motto: "Pilgrim, there is no path. You make the path by walking."

That is my answer to the plaintive question of the secular philosopher, Alain de Botton, who wonders if secular society can attain the same sort of important community as Christianity has developed. "There is no other path to that destination which you have set out. You make the destination by walking."

We Christians shape our identity and form our community "not by setting out to form community" but by following the way of Jesus. It is when we specifically try to follow Jesus, over and over again, that we live into Christian community.

I enjoy talking to young people, and especially these days, young people who may want to get married. They have asked me in the past, "How do I find a wife? How can I find a husband?"

My answer is this: "Do not set out to look for a wife. Do not set out to look exactly for a husband. Set out to follow your heart. Follow your path. Find your vocation. And God will also set the right person alongside you."

In the same way, when we set our heart to follow Jesus, the right sorts of people end up beside us. When we follow Jesus, community happens. Community cannot be forced, and it cannot randomly occur of its own sake. It happens when we share a common good; and it happens when we share a common goal.

This season of Lent may be our most representative path, of what it means to seek and to follow Jesus. "Forty days and forty nights," we sing to Jesus, "thou wast fasting in the wild." Today, we accept the challenge to go with Jesus into that wilderness place, and then even to suffering, maybe even death, before we can also share resurrection.

Are we willing to accept wilderness places as part of the pilgrimage path? Can we believe that God might even be inviting us to enter those wilderness places? After all, the Gospel of Mark today says that it was the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who "drove" Jesus into the wilderness.

Wilderness. We are accustomed to thinking that wilderness experiences occur when we have strayed off track, off the beaten path of religious life and proper faith. When we find ourselves in a wilderness, we often explain that situation by

saying that we have erred and strayed. "We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep."

No, Mark the gospel writer seems to say. The Spirit "drove" Christ into the wilderness. The Spirit may still be driving people into the wilderness, not because we have done anything wrong, but because it is there that we will know Jesus even better. It is there that we will share with Jesus a deeper knowledge of the holy.

The pilgrim way is simply to walk. But it is to walk with Jesus, and Jesus takes us to some difficult, and wonderful places. Finally, in Lent, we die with Christ. We die, so that we might also be born, reborn in Christ, at the Resurrection. Not just one time, at Easter, but over and over again, daily dying and daily living, and so shaping a grand and glorious community of faith.

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(Thomas Cain, Hymn 149, *The Hymnal* 1982)

AMEN.

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