

# **“Companions on the Journey”**

**Luke 24:13-35**

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## Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time World Communion Sunday

In preparing for the pilgrimage to Ireland, I learned that the word ‘companion’ comes from the thirteenth century Latin; ‘com’ meaning ‘with’ and ‘*panis*’ meaning bread. To companion one another means to be bread for one another. This is the message, it’s simple, it elegant, I think I could stop right there, but what would be the fun of that? So I walked it out a little further.

As companions in this Christian faith, as companions on this faith jourrrrrrney, as I first heard it from a Scottish pastor, we are invited to be pilgrims, companions, bread.

If we want to share our faith with others, and do it in a way that does not continue in the patristic (patronizing) colonialism of the past, companioning is a great image. Because it means not only to give but also to receive. There is an equality in companionship. We who went on pilgrimage didn’t go to Ireland to be saved and yet, salvation was surely present; we did not go there to save anyone else and yet, our presence made a difference in the relationships we formed. We could not stay in that place and do not get to keep those relationships close, but instead, we get to know that whether there or here, God is the God of the harvest and good things will continue to come from the work that was begun.

As we said a formal goodbye to our bus driver, Gibson spontaneously read aloud a poem we’d brought along in our pilgrimage booklet, though it came from Ireland in the first place; it’s titled Postscript by Seamus Heaney.

### Postscript

By Seamus Heaney, 1939-2013

And some time make the time to drive out west  
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,  
In September or October, when the wind  
And the light are working off each other  
So that the ocean on one side is wild  
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones  
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit  
By the earthed lightening of a flock of swans,  
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,  
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads  
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.

Useless to think you'll park and capture it  
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,  
A hurry through which known and strange things pass  
As bug soft buffetings come at the car sideways  
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

I didn't stop to count how many times that happened, how many times my heart was blown open; it's only in looking back we can get a glimpse of that bounty. I can hardly describe my joy in finding a group of people not only as geeky as I am about things like the Book of Kells – I mean, you only get to see one set of pages of the book, but folks who lovingly and eagerly visited one burial site after another! I received and received and received.

And I confess, experiencing that magnitude of blessing, made it difficult to return to ordinary life; I also confess that liturgically, I did not return to ordinary life since I took this scripture passage about the road to Emmaus from Eastertide. But that is the mood of companioning; that is the experience of the giving and receiving. It reminds me of a friend from seminary who glimpsed an article about Jesus walking but not knowing where, and thought the title was “the road to amazing.” Books, cemeteries, good food, and miles and miles of beauty – on the road to amazing! Holy ground. Hearts blown open. Each day creating anticipation for more God in the next. These are unique gifts of the temporary days of seeking. The question is, when we return home, do we return to ordinary time, ordinary life, or have we been changed?

In a book on pilgrimage, author Phil Cousineau states, “The art of pilgrimage is the craft of taking time” (notice he says not travel, but time), “the art of pilgrimage is the craft of taking time seriously, elegantly. What every traveler confronts sooner or later is that the way we spend each day of our travel ... is the way we spend our lives. Inspired by our journey, perhaps we can learn the true life we were searching for is here, where our travels and our home life overlap.”

After all, the road to Emmaus began as the road of broken dreams; the starting point for today's text is Jesus' death. The starting point is the deepest vulnerability that the human heart can feel; the loss of a friend, a soul-friend, someone who companions us so well and thoroughly that we feel fed, we feel like life and blessing and love are possible not just for ourselves but for all people. And from out of that loss and that vulnerability, first came their desire to escape, to go home and lick their wounds.

When we were on Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands, our first visit turned out to be a cemetery, or one might say, a garden of Celtic crosses. The tall crosses were surrounded by sea grass growing almost as high as they were. This was a wild and beautiful place, one of my favorites in all Ireland.

We walked all the way in to find a small church, or what was left of a church, four walls, an altar, and a door built into a hill along the shore. Some of us went down the hill and inside the walls while others sat on the edges of stone up above; with [Pádraigín Clancy](#) as our scholar, priest and guide, we flowed easily between history, mythology, Catholicism, archeology, and ritual – there were no

boundaries – maybe because the church had no roof ... everything between heaven and earth, between God and ourselves was open ...

I found out later that the folks there are a bit concerned about the appearance of the graveyard because their caretaker had recently died. I thought it was wild because they wanted it to be wild, as wild as God and found it very hard to leave; we straggled out and gathered on the road. Just as we started walking back toward town we stopped again, Pádraigín saw some friends and told us that they had recently lost their sixteen-year-old daughter to cancer. They were sitting on the edge of a neighboring grave stone, keeping company with their beloved – when at our guides request and with their permission we all prayed the Our Father for them.

We were quite literally standing at the crossroads where hope and loss meet; our new friend and guide gently invited us into an intimate experience of companioning these bereft parents. I knew at the time I would never have done this in my own country. Now it can be a new pattern of faith, a new pattern of companioning. They recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread, in the blowing open of the heart; God's love is shown through us in our ability to companion friend and stranger alike.

As I stood in one church after another that had four walls open to the sky, rocks on the ground, and nothing to sit on – it felt at one and the same time – like the truth of history: everything ends, practices and communities cycle out of existence even to the point of no one knowing for sure what the space was used for; AND it felt new, it felt like some new limitless possibility for the future. Abandoned and empty by human standards, yet God never stopped being present there; it was never declassified and made unholy ground. With Jesus, with this bread, there is more happening than meets the eye!

If we always think we know what is happening, we are invited to think again or as Franciscan Joseph Doyno put it, "Pilgrimage is extroverted mysticism – mysticism is introverted pilgrimage – pilgrimage is prayer of the feet while mysticism is interior footwork."

Therefore, to my fellow Irish pilgrims I ask, were not our hearts burning within us as we walked?! To all of us as fellow pilgrims I inquire, are we yet expecting salvation from God? Because, when we say, "Yes," God says, "Good, I'm going to feed the others first, the refugee, the stranger, and the great diversity of the human family because if I don't, it is you who will starve from closed-off hearts and a lack of imagination. Jesus said, the first will be last and the last first; you must lose your life to gain it, in these, companionship is lifted up. It is in this acceptance we receive and receive and receive.

Jesus' companionship of redemption is never exclusionary. We all need beauty. We are all fed by being heard, understood and accepted. Everyone is fed through creative expression. Humanity is fed by respect, caring, and kindness. We are all fed by a wholeness of justice and peace. These we cannot make for ourselves, rather the more of this we give, the more we will get and it is amazing!

On this World Communion Sunday as this meal moves around the entire globe, this companionship of Jesus' presence that becomes our meal is a particular kind of nutrition; The Christ is bread for us

and we are bread for the world. It nourishes a mindset for us as we get up every morning wondering, to whom will I be bread today? What an adventure it will be.

And while I now know there is some spiritual direction can only come from the wit and wisdom of an Irish bus driver – the opportunity to be a pilgrim in the world is in fact, daily and ordinary, as well as geographical and particular. Richard Niebuhr wrote, “Pilgrims are persons in motion – passing through territories not their own – seeking something we might call completion, or perhaps the word clarity will do as well, a goal to which only the spirit’s compass points the way.” To tell the truth, I wrote the words about receiving more than a week ago and it kept coming to mind each day in between – with both gratitude and wonder. On the road to Amazing, – the first are last and the last are first is a lived reality: We are best fed by first making sure others have what they need. Thanks be to God. Amen.