

The Way is Made by Walking

Luke 17:5-6, 11-19

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Kyle Childress

For thinking is inherently bound up with doing, and it is in rational activity together with others that we find our peculiar satisfaction.

- Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, p. 208

Solvitur ambulando is an old phrase coming to us from the Latin, translated as “it is solved by walking” or “it is made by walking.” Though the concept goes back to the ancient Greeks, St. Augustine made the phrase famous when he talked about abstract philosophical problems having practical, down-to-earth solutions.

But Augustine meant more. “*Solvitur ambulando*” means a completely different way of knowing, a knowing that comes only when we are actively engaged in the questions being asked. It is the way of knowing that comes with participation, involvement.

The disciples come to Jesus and say, “Increase our faith. Our faith is too small. We don’t know enough. We don’t believe enough. There is much we don’t understand and a whole lot we can’t do or we’re afraid to attempt. So Jesus, give us more faith” (Luke 17:5).

Jesus responds, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed there is so much you could do. You don’t need a bigger faith. You need to do the faith you already

have. You learn to work by working and you have faith as you practice faith.” In other words, faith is about walking the walk. *Solvitur ambulando*.

So, the first thing to remember is that you do not have to have a lot of faith. Just a little bit will do. The disciples in this story had already dropped all they were doing and were following Jesus. I’m sure they were beset by doubts and questions and concerns. In the middle of the night they probably asked themselves, “What have I gotten myself into? Back home I had a steady job, steady income, steady meals, and a roof over my head. And now I’m out here following this rabbi, whom I think is going to change the world, but I don’t know for sure.” And they probably worried, “My heavens, Jesus! I wouldn’t have said that. You’re making some powerful people mad. You’re making enemies.” Doubts and fears, questions and concerns were part and parcel of their faith. And they were doing the best they could by getting up each morning and following Jesus wherever he led them. They already had faith; it was not perfect faith – but then faith is never perfect. For it to be faith it includes doubt and risk.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of a good friend who was a professor in a large university. His partner was dying and he did everything he knew to do ease the suffering most especially honest and raw prayers pleading with God to do something, work a miracle, ease the pain, something. Some time later, she asked her friend about his prayers.

He said, “You want to know whether I really believe God will intervene like that? ... I don’t know. I’m not naïve ... Honestly, I don’t think it through. I just tell God what I want and what occurs to me and my honest feelings and yearnings. I’m not smart enough or strong enough to do anything else. I tell God what I want and I

trust God to sort it out.” Brown Taylor concludes, “We don’t have to have a Ph.D. in prayer” (*An Altar in the World*, p. 181-182).

The disciples wanted a Ph.D. in faith and Jesus said, “You don’t need a Ph.D. in faith. All you need is a kindergarten degree in faith.” Just the faith of a child will do.

All you need is enough faith to get up and start walking the walk. You don’t have to walk well or fast. Just take a step. Just learn to walk. Do faith in order to have faith. We don’t get it ahead of time; faith comes by living it. *Solvitur ambulando*.

The predominant assumption about the Christian faith is that there are abstract doctrines that we are taught and we either believe them or not. But the Christian faith is less propositional cognitive assertions than it is a craft or skill. To learn to ride a bicycle has little to do with listening to a lecture on riding bicycles, reading a book on it, listening to a podcast, or even watching a video about it. Bicycle riding does not depend on what you believe about it. One learns to ride a bicycle by getting on a bicycle and start riding. Perhaps with training wheels at first, then slowly, wobbly, with stops and starts, falls and probably even crashes and skinned knees, but we learn to bicycle by bicycling. As many of you have heard me say before, Christian discipleship is like learning to play the piano or learning to hit a curveball or learning to be a good carpenter or learning to quilt. We learn by doing. Most assuredly, we receive instruction and we learn and practice together – in community. But we have faith and learn to pray by praying, we learn to worship God by worshiping God, we learn to serve by serving, and learn to forgive by forgiving. Indeed, we know God by practicing faith. Not by studying abstract doctrine, God is known through engagement, immersing

ourselves in God by faith, prayer, worship, service, and forgiveness. *Solvitur ambulando*.

Luke then tells this story, “On the way to Jerusalem . . . as he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean” (Luke 17:11-14).

The story continues that when one of the ten discovers that he is healed, turns back, praises God with a loud voice, and falls at Jesus’ feet and thanks him. Luke pointedly adds, “And he was a Samaritan” (17:16). Jesus responds by asking, “Were there not ten made clean? Where are the other nine? Only this foreigner returned to give thanks.” And he says to the one who had returned, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well” (17:17-19).

Notice some interesting phrases and verbs. Notice that Luke begins by saying, “On the way to Jerusalem” and “as he entered a village.” Then the key phrase in the key sentence, “And as they went, they were made clean” (17:14). Luke concludes the story with the same phrase with which he began, Jesus saying, “go on your way.”

On the way, as he entered, as they went, go on your way . . . all terms of movement, dynamism, journey. This entire story of healing and giving thanks is bracketed by the key phrase “on the way.” In between, their healing happens “as they went.” Healing did not occur before and then they went, and it did not occur after they had gone. Healing happened on the way, as they went, on the journey, on the road.

What I think Luke is showing us is that this faith we disciples want increased, is increased “on the way,” and “as we go.” Faith is practiced on the way. We don’t sit and figure it out; we don’t get it ahead of time. We participate in it and it grows as we go. *Solvitur ambulando*.

In many of the arts, and in the ones I know the best are the literary arts like writing and preaching, we learn to write by writing and often, very often, we do not know what to say until we begin to write. Quite often once I start a sermon, it goes in directions I never dreamed before I started. But I must get started. I must take the first step.

In the 2000 movie, *Finding Forrester*, the old, veteran writer (played by Sean Connery) tells the young writer to write an essay. The young man is paralyzed, “What do I write?” “It doesn’t matter, just write,” he is told. “But how can I start? I need inspiration.” The old writer tells him to just start typing. Type anything; type the keys randomly. Just type. And the physical act of typing will get you to where you will start writing the essay. Just type, the words will come. Just do it.

There is something about the active process that allows us to see things we would otherwise be blind to. Participating in this activity generates perception, insight, energy, and even faith. We discover as we go. *Solvitur ambulando*.

My friend theologian Arthur Boers, says, “God is a moving target... Deity is not easily tied down” (*The Way is Made by Walking*, p. 39), and certainly not nailed down. It is why the theologian Karl Barth once described God’s word and revelation to us as “a bird in flight” (“The Christian’s Place in Society,” *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p.282). It is why veteran preachers know that sermons are never finished by Sunday morning. I know, I know sometimes, it is

procrastination or negligence. But good preachers know there are always more insights, another quote, further elaboration, editing, and loose ends to be tied up. Most importantly we discover as well as confirm what we believe by writing and by preaching what we write. Those of us who mostly know what we're doing, realize that sermons are never finished but they are preached because it is Sunday. The time has come.

Sermons mirror the Christian life and the life of faith. It is about movement and change and growth, transformation and being made whole as we go. The Christian life is provisional. Faith is provisional. Because we're always learning more, seeing more, experiencing more, and doing more – as we go, on the way.

This is why pilgrimage has always been so central in Christian history. Participating in pilgrimages to the Holy Land, to Rome, to Canterbury, to Santiago de Compostela in Spain (like our own Vicki Lunell), and many others, is a time-honored way to deepen faith. Often pilgrims start out thinking that the destination is the most important part – getting to Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher or to Canterbury Cathedral or wherever. What they discover is the pilgrimage itself transforms. Practicing prayer, contemplation, meditating upon holy texts, and practicing holy rituals as they go, is transformative. The way is made by walking. *Solvitur ambulando*.

Saint Catherine of Siena, who died in 1380, said, “All the way to heaven is heaven” reminding us that in the Christian life ends and means are bound up with one another. The full sentence from Catherine goes further, “All the way to heaven is heaven because he said, ‘I am the Way.’”

Jesus tells us that he is the Way (John 14:6). Today's scripture is all about being on the way, and go on your way. We follow the way, we walk the way, and

we walk the walk that Jesus walked in order to know Jesus. The disciples ask for more faith. And all they need is faith the size of a mustard seed, enough to follow the Way. And on the way their faith will be made whole. The way is made by walking. *Solvitur ambulando*.

All of our lives are to be a journey with and to God. Together we walk. We are, like the pilgrims to Canterbury, part of “a company of sundry folk.” All sorts of us walk the way and follow the way. Every Sunday morning we get up and go to church – which we learn to view as a mini-pilgrimage. We are on the way together. The old English word “parish” means “a congregation of pilgrims.”

And when we get here we participate in all sorts of rituals and practices. We walk in and we sit and we rise. We bow our heads and pray. We learn to listen to word and music, as well as participate when we read together and when we sing hymns. I remind you we sing together – whether we sing well or badly, strong or weak, we sing together.

Tom Long tells the story of a friend attending a summer pastor’s conference. He walks in and sees his old seminary theology professor and they warmly greet each other and have a great conversation. The service starts so they sit together. When the preacher for the service gets in the pulpit, he announces that he is going to do an “experimental sermon” where he will preach for a few minutes and then the congregation will sing a stanza of a hymn and then he will preach, they will sing, and so on. So they begin and it was not going well. The preaching was okay but the singing was not.

The friend leaned over to his old professor and whispered, “My heavens, this is awful! In fact, this reminds me of something you said in class one day.”

The professor was somewhat startled and whispered back, “Something I said in class!?”

“Yes,” the friend said laughing under his breath, “We were studying J.S. Whale’s book *Christian Doctrine*, and you said that Whale was a weak theologian because every time he encountered a theological problem he couldn’t solve, he quoted a hymn!”

The old professor straightened up in the pew. “Well, I was wrong,” he said. “I was young and brash, and I was wrong. Now I realize there are some theological problems that can be addressed only by singing hymns.” (from Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*, p. 117-118).

I write so I’ll know what I believe. We pray so we’ll learn to pray. We sing so our faith will grow. The way is made by walking. *Solvitur ambulando*.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.