

Ash Wednesday A
Peace, Seattle
March 9, 2011 epk

TOURISTS OR PILGRIMS?

Some years ago, I attended a workshop led by Dr. Dale Borglum, director of the Living/Dying Project in San Francisco, and he told this story:

After finishing graduate school at UC Berkeley in the late 60's, he was ready for a new direction and this desire led him to travel to the Far East.¹

One month after receiving his doctorate in mathematics, he found himself standing on the soil of India, on a pilgrimage route during a major religious festival. Beggars lined both sides of the road as far as the eye could see. The face of poverty was everywhere.

This festival was an opportune time for the impoverished masses because it was understood that giving alms to beggars aided the spiritual progress of those who gave.

So the cripple, the blind, the lame, the diseased, "untouchables" of all ages and with every kind of impediment lined the paths which the pilgrims would take on their journey.

Dale had heard of this festival and the beggars who lined the route, and wanted to participate, so he cashed in some American dollars and stuffed his pockets with small copper coins. As he walked with the crowd down the road, he passed the coins, one by one, into the cans and bowls of the beggars.

Midway through the morning, he came upon a young woman. What he saw stopped his heart.

She had no hands or feet. Leprosy had eaten them away. Somehow she'd managed to wrap tin cans over the stumps which had been her hands, and she sat, legs crossed, on a small, wheeled platform, with a beggars' bowl in front of her.

Dale was so caught up in the sight of this young woman, that at first he didn't notice that the bundle of rags strapped to her chest was more than a mere bundle. But when he saw the bundle move, he realized that bundle was an infant.

He felt so sorry for her. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out not a copper coin, but a Rupee bill worth 100 coins, and placed it in her bowl. **Then, something he did not expect happened.**

The woman looked up at him, and at the bill in her bowl; looked at him again and back at the bill, and suddenly she turned her bowl upside down dumping the Rupee out on the road; and using the stumps of her hands, propelled herself and the baby away from him on her cart, out into the crowd.

Why did she do it? Why did she reject what would, in all likelihood, be the most generous token she would receive that day? There seemed to be no answer.

Years later, as director of the Living and Dying Center in San Francisco, working daily with people who faced terminal illness, the memory of his encounter with the woman returned.

¹ From story told by Dale Borglum at Living/Dying Conference, 1st UMC, Portland, Oregon, 1997.

Perhaps, he thought, she had refused his gift because she could not afford to accept an offering that was given out of pity. Only alms that were given out of duty would do.

Or perhaps she sensed that his was the gift of a tourist, and not a pilgrim.²

Tonight, we begin the 40-day journey we call Lent. The ashes we will soon wear are an emblem of our common origins and our shared destiny: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

We're all on the same journey together, and it's a journey marked by wrong turns, escape routes-turned-dead-ends, and broken trails.

The ashes mark our origin and destiny as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. But the ashes are also signs of our eagerness to have the seed of mercy sown anew in our lives, and to receive the living water to make it grow.

We pray, CREATE IN US CLEAN HEARTS O GOD, and the ashes fertilize the soil of our lives.

We pray, TAKE WHAT IS UNFINISHED IN OUR LIVES AND MAKE IT WHOLE, and we look to Christ to companion us broken ones as we turn again to the waters that claimed and named us.

There are two ways we can travel through this season: as tourists, or as pilgrims.

A tourist will take pictures along the way, acquire souvenirs, stroll through the old ruins, and all the while will harbor a secret longing for home and his own bed. A tourist will keep things at arms length; will observe but not commit; experience but not entrust.

A pilgrim will approach the journey differently. Instead of an itinerary of destinations, the pilgrim will see the journey itself as the destination. She will leave her camera at home, but will not go empty handed. No, she will take with her some of the ancient tools of discipline which many pilgrims before her have used: Prayer, fasting, sharing her alms.

She may choose to relinquish a habit that gets in the way of true living, or may choose to take up a new practice that will keep her focused on the way of Jesus, and his footsteps before her.

These and other spiritual habits of the heart will keep her tending the garden of her soul.

**The season we begin this night is a season for Christian pilgrims.
Via con dios. Go with God.**

Amen.

² My suggestion, not Borglum's.