

Fifth Sunday of Easter

John 14:1-14

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by Colleen Clayton

After I finished my theological study, and before I began my curacy, my husband and I went to Europe and walked part of the Camino de Santiago. The Camino, means *the way*, though in reality there are many ways, criss-crossing Europe, leading to the town of Santiago de Compostela.

Tradition has it that the Apostle James, *Sant Iago*, visited Northern Spain, preaching the Gospel in what is now Galicia. In the 9th century, what were believed to be his remains were found and a shrine was established there in his memory.

That was the beginning of the Camino as pilgrims from all over Europe began to walk to his shrine. It is a spiritual practice that is alive and well today. In 2019 almost 350,000 pilgrims went to the Pilgrim's Office in Santiago to register the end of their pilgrimages and to collect their certificates.

The oldest Camino is the Primitivo, while the most popular is the Francais. We didn't walk either of these but chose part of the Via de la Plata, walking north-east from just outside Madrid.

Although we had downloaded the route maps before we left home, I wondered how we would actually find our way from one place to the next. I needn't have worried. One of the delights of the Camino were the yellow arrows that pointed out the route. These little yellow arrows gave the way the sense of a treasure hunt that someone had carefully prepared for us; clues leading us onwards to a place to rest and be still at the end of a day of walking.

Sometimes the arrows were painted roughly on walls, sometimes they were found in tiles laid into the footpath, sometimes there were arrows

and scallop shells, the symbol of pilgrimage. Some arrows were easy to find, others were easy to miss.

The yellow arrows were fun but for me, the biggest delight of the Camino, was the people. Mostly elderly, they would call out to us as we passed, *Buen Camino peregrinos*; good walking pilgrims.

As we walked, we shared many wonderful conversations and much laughter with these people. Mostly the conversations were in Spanish, a language I speak, not at all, but it didn't matter. Their hospitality was obvious in the free pieces of pilgrim cake they offered with our coffees, in their desire to communicate and in the encouragement of the words *Buen Camino!* The lack of a shared language was no problem at all.

I find many resonances between my experience of walking the Camino and today's reading from the Gospel according to John. Jesus is beginning his long farewell to his disciples and he tells them not to let their hearts be troubled because although he is leaving them, he is going to prepare a place for them. And, he says, you know the way to get there. Thomas, confused by this, says that the disciples do not know the way and Jesus tells him; *I am the way, and the truth, and the life* (14:6a).

The way for Jesus' followers is not a path, it is not a series of steps to follow, it is not marked by little yellow arrows. It is a person - Jesus. It is not possible to map the many details of a person, people can only be known through relationship. It takes time, curiosity and openness to the other.

Jesus tells his disciples that entering into a relationship with him is also the way to enter a relationship with God his father. Knowing him, they know and have seen the Father. Jesus says, *Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me* (14:11a).

Jesus has the most intimate relationship imaginable with God; he abides in him. And Jesus goes to prepare a place for us so that we too might abide with God, enfolded in God's hospitality, safe, cared for, able to rest.

Jesus' promise of relationship comes at an interesting time in John's Gospel. Often, in human relationships, it is a sense that things are going really well that leads us to imagine and speak about being together

forever, living happily ever after. However, it is not so with Jesus. He makes this promise about preparing a place for his disciples to abide with him and the Father just after he has predicted that one will deny him and one will betray him.

This is so encouraging! Jesus' promise that we will be given places to be, places where we can rest in God, is spoken into the midst of the brokenness of human relationships. The worst that humanity has to offer still cannot remove the promise that we can abide in God. Through our relationship with Jesus he will be the way for us so that we may enter the places prepared for us in love; places where we are welcome, accepted and loved, just as we are.

Jesus speaks to his disciples about going away and abiding in the same conversation. It seems that the disciples struggled to understand how it was possible for Jesus to go away and for them to abide in him. It doesn't seem to make sense. Here, I think, we have the advantage over those first disciples. They had known Jesus in the flesh, we have not. We know that we can abide in Jesus, our way to God, despite the fact that we are physically separated from him.

Jesus, *the way*, is our journey and our destination. He abides in God, does God's works, and reveals to us what God is like. Jesus' Father, and ours, is a God of hospitality who has a place ready for everyone to rest and who never gives up on us, no matter what.

Abiding in Jesus means that we continue to be in an intimate relationship with him, and through him, with the Father, despite the fact that we are physically separated from him. This is a love that is not going away! The emphasis in this place in John's writing is on our connection with God. Yes, Jesus is going away but paradoxically, his going away is in order to enable us to abide with him.

All this is very good news in a world of social distancing and self-isolation! Our Gospel encourages us that even while we are separated from each other physically, together we still abide in God's love.

Let me return, briefly, to the Camino. When we arrived in Santiago we had walked 108kms. We met others who had walked 1,500kms! People join the way at different points, for different lengths of time and with different intentions. Some walk alone, some walk with friends, some

match their steps for a time with a variety of fellow pilgrims, regrouping as they go.

Where the road is clear and straight, there are almost no yellow arrows. They are mostly found at points where the path diverges or when it is not clear which way to go. There is a delightful ambiguity in them. They point the way but they do not give definitive information just a guide to the direction to take next.

This Gospel reading and the Camino have much to say to Parish life. Our parish was created in 1865 and many, many people have walked the way together since then. Now I too have come to journey with you.

We are called to abide in Jesus, our *way*. Abiding means being in relationship and that means sharing our needs and concerns as well as our joys. It means making an effort to communicate, even when we appear to speak different languages. It means encouraging each other as fellow pilgrims, remembering that we are all walking the same path. And when the way ahead is not clear, it means being willing to patiently search for the next little yellow arrow and to joyfully follow its direction in company with our fellow pilgrims.

Buen Camino peregrinos!

The Lord be with you.