

## “A JOURNEY OF THE HEART”

Reflections on my Iona Pilgrimage June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019

Yesterday when I was at the post office picking up our mail, I ran into Dick. He said, “Welcome home, Pastor!” And I responded that I was glad to be back. I am back home after traveling for two weeks in Scotland and Northern England on Pilgrimage. I found another home that I didn’t know was waiting for me but it has been calling for a long time. That was the island of Iona especially the Abbey there. The worship and the Iona Community and sharing it with our group of pilgrims was so meaningful to me and I will go back often in memory of those times of drawing nearer to God.

Just to back up a little –as I shared with you at the May 26<sup>th</sup> worship service, I was leaving June 2<sup>nd</sup> on a Pilgrimage to Iona, Scotland “as a quest to encounter God.” The goal was to draw nearer to God and to be open to His blessings along the way. We received this Pilgrim’s Credo before we left and it left no wiggle room for our expectations for the journey:

I am not in control.  
I am not in a hurry.  
I walk in faith and hope.  
I greet everyone with peace.  
I bring back only what God gives me.

At the beginning of the journal I kept during my pilgrimage I wrote: This journey will pay particular attention to pace, practice, and purpose. As pilgrims we journey to sacred places seeking transformation of the inner landscape of our souls. It is our hope that we will leave homes to find our true Home and return with “bliss-bestowing hands.” I’m sure I took that from some of the materials we were given as pilgrims....

There were 25 of us on this pilgrimage: 23 pilgrims from all over the U.S. plus Dr. Lloyd Allan, professor of Christian history with a special emphasis on Celtic Spirituality for this trip and Pat Luna, our Academy Retreat leader.

One of the itinerary emails we received put it this way: Over the centuries the sacred isles of Iona and Lindisfarne have been places of pilgrimage—places where saints lived, where prayers have been offered, and where lives have been deepened. Tourist come to see; pilgrims come to be. A pilgrimage deports us from home and exports us out of our comfort zone into liminal places, inviting us to cross thresholds where we find new ways of being in the world. ...Academy faculty and Christian historian, Loyd Allen, will illumine this sacred journey as our spiritual guide. Academy Retreat Leader, Pat Luna, will shepherd our community on this holy pilgrimage. A local guide from Scotland will also join us as we trace the historic path of Celtic Christianity including Iona, Lindisfarne, and St. Cuthbert’s Shrine in Durham Cathedral.

Although we have a full itinerary, this is a contemplative journey, so a relaxed, reflective pace is sought even on our busiest days. During a pilgrimage, the focus is not on what we are doing or where we are going but on the presence of God with us....Lectures, and plenary, times of silence, prayer and reflection, small group sharing, opportunities to participate in the worship life of Iona Abbey, Lindisfarne, and Durham Cathedral, guided pilgrimage walks, and many other experiences are all designed to allow this experience to deepen our relationship with God and enter fully into the journey.

One of the cautions that Dr. Allen shared with us at the beginning of our trip was that because of its nature and purpose and pace our travels were not to be one of a photographic journey or one for shopping. Some of that would happen

along the way but it was not to intrude on our times of prayer, worship, reflection, silence and solitude. This was more difficult for some of us than others but I took it to heart. I really craved this time away and I wanted to be fully immersed in the experiences and opportunities that God was offering me.

When we applied to be a participant in this pilgrimage we had to affirm that we were well and able to walk some distances. This is one of the reasons Loyd advised us to travel light—with just a backpack and carryon for luggage. That was the first challenge for me because I have always traveled with a large suitcase when going overseas. But I decided to accept the challenge and only left Denver with my backpack and a small carryon bag. One of the reasons we were cautioned to “travel light” is that we would be carrying our own bags at times and sometimes walking with them over cobblestone streets, etc. He was absolutely right and I was daily glad that I had taken his advise.

Another challenge and opportunity that I really wanted to accept was the walking/hiking required to be part of community and “to enter fully into the journey.” It turned out to be a learning experience and a humbling one. I had tried to prepare myself with daily walking either outside or on the treadmill. However, I did not anticipate a landscape where we would be walking much of the time in unseasonably cold, rainy and windy weather! (Actually I should have but I didn't) One of the locals in Edinburgh told us this June had been unusual in how cold and rainy it was so I didn't feel too bad. We were all scrambling to wear as many layers as we had brought for warmth and dryness and some of us actually had to buy warm stocking caps, gloves, etc.

One of our planned hikes was from the Abbey at Iona to the southern most point of the island. Our goal was to reach St. Columba's Bay where St. Columba and a few fellow travelers landed in 563 A.D. to establish a monastery. The hike was 3 miles each way over trails of rocky terrain and bogs. The main problem for me was that even though that day was blessed with sun we had had several days of rain and the trail was very slippery in spots. We made it to the point and had time for silence, solitude, prayer and reflection. Then we were asked to pick up two stones. One we would throw back into the sea and it carried our regrets for the past and the other stone we would carry back with us with our hopes and dreams for the future. It was a very rewarding time for me and I felt so blessed.

On the way back I was picking my way along trying to be mindful of the slippery places when I fell, hitting my head and left hip on some rocks. I was immediately helped up by Loyd and fellow pilgrims and asked if I was okay. I was although covered in mud on my left side. At that point Loyd and I had a conversation about walking sticks. I had never used one before but I had never walked on terrain like that and my balance isn't what it used to be either. So I took his advise and used a walking stick thereafter—as most of the pilgrims (far wiser than I) had been doing from the get go. It was a lesson in humility and common sense that I needed.

On another short hike to the Hermit's Cell, still on Iona, I was using my walking stick and doing better. When we arrived at this little stone circle where the hermit had lived out his life in prayer and solitude, I felt so surrounded by his prayers and all of the other pilgrims that had traveled there. It was another blessing of the journey and of God's presence. We also took a ferry to Staffa Island on a sunny day (a miracle in itself). It was an island comprised of columns of basalt with a little soil and ground cover on top. Walking to the top of the island required climbing up 30 steps to the top, about 3 stories high. Then we walked out a ways to where the puffins were nesting. They burrowed into the ground for safety and when the sea gulls were gone, they would pop out and enjoy the sunshine. We didn't seem to bother them as long as we were quiet. It was so fun to see them appear for a short while and then pop down again! They are clownish looking birds with a colorful beak and a little round body. Somewhere on these hikes a fellow pilgrim walked with me a ways to be sure I was okay and told me

that I should not feel embarrassed about needing some help at times—that we were community and everyone cared and so they would help each of us if we needed it.

I found that comforting and eased my sense of neediness somewhat.

Some of my most treasured moments on this pilgrimage were of being able to worship in these sacred places where the presence of God was so strong and touched me deeply. We were able to worship at the Abbey on Iona which had been established by St. Columba on that site and rebuilt after the Vikings had destroyed it. The Iona Community established in the '30's lives and worships at that site and has a vibrant presence there, both for short-term pilgrims and members of the village. We would walk up from the St. Columba Hotel where we were staying, up the path to the Abbey for Evening Prayers and at other times as well—sometimes with community and sometimes alone.

On the Holy Island at Lindisfarne, we participated in daily worship at St. Mary's Parrish Church and also individually at the ruins of the Monastery and on the coast, sitting by the beach in the beauty of the day and the seashore. A special memory for me of the island was an early morning walk to the coast with some of the other pilgrims to be there as the sun was shining over the waves toward us. There were numerous cairns (stacks of prayer rocks) created by many pilgrims over the years and God's presence was powerful there!!

I have tried to share a little of the pilgrimage with you, my friends, in the hope that you will get a sense of what it was like for me. I'm sure that you will hear more as the weeks go by. I am still pondering what the trip meant for me and what God wants for me to bring home from it. With God's help I will understand more and more as the days and weeks pass. But I would like to close with a devotion I discovered while I was there in the Celtic Daily Prayer book:

“Iona has cast its spell on the sons of men. In early times, it heard the sweet songs of God sung by Saint Columba and his followers. In later days, greater men than we have found there what they sought. This island set apart, this mother land of many dreams, still yields its secret, but it is only as people seek that they truly find. To reach the heart of Iona is to find something eternal—fresh vision and new courage for every place where love or duty or pain may call us. And whoever has so found is ever wishful to return.”

May you be blessed by the seeking, by the searching to be closer to the heart of God and may you find “fresh vision and new courage for every place where love or duty or pain may call [you].” Amen and amen.