



PILGRIMAGE

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APRIL
06
2025

Well, we're ending our series today on the spiritual ways of this church, which we talk of as daily practice, weekly worship, monthly service, annual retreat, and at least once in life pilgrimage.

So pilgrimage is something I want to talk about today. I used to think about pilgrimage as a long spiritual journey to an exotic land, and for me it was that. When I was 22 years old and got the call to the ministry on top of a mountain in the Himalayas, that pilgrimage was very real to me, a story that you can read in my book by the way. But today, I think of it differently. It is something, I think, that you can do in your backyard or in a place of importance to you or on a long journey to an exotic place. The goal of pilgrimage though is to find the sacred in your life, in your backyard, in a place of importance or an exotic land, to find the sacred in your life. And we should want this as spiritual beings, opportunities to deepen the appreciation for life, seeing more clearly who we are in the world, confronting a question or two that shapes us, that is what pilgrimage is all about.

The problem is that we live in a culture that is often more dissatisfied than satisfied with the things in our lives, and so we pursue things, like food and culture and travel, I call travel checklist travel, where you're checking off all the things you see and do, as if your life is measured by those things rather than who you are. The pilgrim though seeks something different. The pilgrim, the word meaning per agrum, to walk through the fields, to leave the couch, the path you always go down, the common ways in your life that you take, to get out of touch with what is comfortable, to touch sacred places and things, to encounter ancient things that put you in touch with something deeper than your daily routines, that is pilgrimage.

To Cooperstown to touch Hank Aaron's bat, to Athens, to touch a column in the Parthenon, to Boston to touch the pulpit of Emerson, where he spoke the Divinity School Address into the world in 1838, to the burial place of your ancestors, to India to touch the chalices of the church there. What I'm talking about is taking a spiritually transformative journey to a sacred place that is sacred to you, to your family or to your tribe, a journey to a crossroad, a journey that you can't, can't take. We talk about this as a once in a lifetime opportunity, but certainly it could happen more frequently. It is what I call intentional journeying, respectful and reverential travel, being open to the profound opportunities that happen to us when we step off the common way that we go, to be prepared to be moved.

The prophet Van Morrison said, "I am a soul in wonder, I am a soul in wonder." The pilgrim travels in wonder close to the divine with a question about life, creating time to ask those questions. I'm not talking about some pious journey on some prescribed pilgrimage. I'm talking about an intentional journey where something in you needs to change or something in the way you relate to God or to your marriage or to your family, where something in you is asking you to take time in your life to ask good spiritual questions, the backyard to a foreign land or to a place of importance to you. Often, it encounters the dark threads of history and culture, because they reveal what is real in those places too. The philosopher Goethe responded to this holy longing of pilgrimage saying, "If you do not go into the world, you will forever remain an untroubled guest."

So we offer you pilgrimages here in the church. We go to Boston, the heritage trip, we have civil rights tours, and we go to India. I want to talk about India today. I've been going to India since I was 19 years old, especially in the last six years, to the far northeastern state of Meghalaya, where a Unitarian community lives and is strong. This year, as the first part of my sabbatical, I spent seven weeks with the Unitarians in Northeast India to deepen my understanding and sense of their version of our shared faith. Every day I was there, I asked myself a series of questions, I did my daily practice, I immersed myself in the practices of the Unitarians there.

There are 10,000 Unitarians in Northeast India in a place that is closer to Myanmar than to New Delhi, churches smaller than our smallest church and churches as large as this one, many lay leaders and many lay ministers. Children there lead their own worship services. Prayer and songs are essential to their faith. There is grace before every meal, there is silence when the chalice is lit, there is silence when the service ends. They literally don't get out of bed and put their feet on the floor without first thanking God for waking up once again. They are anxious to meet you. They have a lot to teach us.

When we go, we learn the story of their founder, a man who started a movement for Unitarianism, who had the same kind of experience that many of you have had sitting in church or reading the Bible or listening to a preacher, and you start thinking, none of this makes sense. When you heard that preacher tell you about the vengeful God of Christianity or how some people are God's sheep and some are goats and that you will burn in eternal damnation for who you love or what you doubt, and meanwhile, you're reading those stories that say God loves humanity and that commandment about love your neighbor and turn the other cheek. He had that, this doesn't make

sense moment, while hearing all that damnation and reading all that love, kind of like you did, and he thought, why is this so contradictory? Have you had those moments? I grew up Unitarian, I didn't have those moments.

But as you evolved and changed and transformed and paid attention to your spirit a little more closely, you might have what I would call awakenings in those questions. And if you've had those awakenings and ponderings and queries, you join countless of others who have had the same since the start of the church. The man in India's name was Hajam Kissor Singh, and he came to this in the late 1800s. At age 15, Singh converted to the reformed faith of the Welsh missionaries from the indigenous faith of his culture. He was a brilliant young man. He started teaching himself religion. He became a self-described, and I quote, "Questioning member of the Methodist Church." Do we have any of those? He started recording his difficulties, his concerns, in the original thinking about Christianity and his questions about how his own indigenous faith had developed. He was doing this all in the context of the dark threads of British colonialism. The missionaries' complicity and violence are the background out of which he starts a movement.

And Singh realized a few things. He realized that the Welsh missionaries had done away with the fear of the demons of the indigenous culture only to replace it with the fear of hell. He complained also about the missionaries' hostility toward the Catholics and toward the Khasi tribal people. What he saw in the Methodist missionaries' behavior, he said, was different than what he was reading about Jesus, and he concluded that he would have to leave that church to seek, and I quote, "The true religion of Jesus, the love of God." For Hajam Kissor Singh, Jesus, he said, was a man, God was one, we are originally good and not saved by the cross, but by our character. And so, he left the Calvinist Church looking for a liberal theology that made sense, and he found a Unitarian minister in Kolkata and the writings of William Ellery Channing.

This remarkable man was 22 years old in 1887 when he led the first Unitarian service in the city of Juwai in Eastern Meghalaya. Within 12 years, his church was over 200 members and growing to other churches in the region. This was his statement that they adopted in 1888, "We believe in one, the unity of God, in two, the fatherhood and motherhood of God, in three, the brotherhood of man, in four, the love, union, worship and faith, and in five, in immortality." God was one, mother and father, non-gendered, nurturing, holding, providing, guiding, something to trust in. When I asked one of the two full-time ministers for 10,000 people, get that right, two full-time ministers for 10,000 people, her name is Darihoon. I said, "Darihoon, what is God for the Khasi Unitarians?" She said, "God is a thing too big to understand. Not personal, not human, it's spiritual, it's in the heart. Our purpose is to feel part and parcel of God, to feel we are part of something much bigger than our private lives."

To love God and each other is a call in their hymns, over and over, to live for others is the goal of life, to make goodness wherever we go. And they say the words khublei as a greeting, khublei, khu means short blessing, blei means God. It means God bless, it means thank you, it means goodnight. It means goodbye, it means I am sorry. Thank you, I have nothing to give but God's blessing, goodnight, sleep in the infinite's arms, goodbye, god be with you. Sorry, if I hurt you, I am

nothing, may God heal all. Khublei, the roots of this understanding of God come from the indigenous religion, God is everything and not one thing.

In this understanding is the clash between Christianity and the Khasi indigenous religion. For them, worship matters, not because they like coming together and seeing their friends, but because worship helps them have gratitude, stay connected, combat indifference. Worship is something for them that takes place in the church, it takes place in homes, it takes place before meals. It is a way, they say, of saying, "Thank you for all of this." They say, "We believe in immortality, we do not ever die. No heaven and no hell, but eternal existence, which cannot be described. But," they say, "We are spiritual energies." To live for eternity is something which I say is slightly more hopeful than to die into nothing.

Hajam Kissor Singh started writing hymns to teach this newfound religion. They were heretical in the Christian community and they came out of the indigenous soil. They rejected sacrifices of the indigenous and they rejected sacrifices in Christianity, and they declared Ka Niam in Khasi, the true religion of God, the religion that extends before all time and into the future that does not require gifts of sacrifice so that we receive blessings, because life already is the blessing. So he wove a new tapestry, one that paved a way between Christianity and of the missionaries, no sacrifice of Jesus is required to save us and the path of the indigenous, no sacrifice to the gods or the demons is needed for the crops or our lives. And he pushed a Unitarianism that had a deep abiding call to rest from the anxieties of life in the cosmic and universal love he called God.

"God truly loves us," hymn 190 says, it wants us to be happy and well. In this love, wisdom and satisfaction, all things exist. Like under a shadow of a tree, you are given shelter, you find trust. Like when you drink the cold water, you find grounded satisfaction in the world. It's not easy to describe this grounded satisfaction. There are actually many words for this same concept, but the concept guides all of this form of Unitarianism in Northeast India, that our world, our life, our practice, our worship, is all to gain a deep spiritual gratification. A [foreign language 00:17:15] to be satisfied, to be grounded, to know a certain rest from anxiety, to rest in God's hands, all coming from this understanding that we are in the world, we are in the pursuit of something spiritual, we are pilgrims in our lives.

One of the most profound conversations I had in Northeast India, and continue to have with a friend of mine there, who is a biologist and a specialist in caves and the creatures found in the pools deep in the caves there, here's what he said this time as we sat in his kitchen having tea and eating oranges, he said, "God is consciousness beyond the human mind, God is beyond history. It is the ocean, and we are the streams that run towards it. To have gratitude to the divine means having wonder in life. If you live spiritually, you stay connected to the source. To live spiritual lives is to help others, to pray, to worship, to serve others. To live righteously is to stay connected, to walk in the divine path, to be helpful, to walk away from sin. If you disconnect from God, the stream diverts and the chance is that you dry up. But if you stay connected, you can't dry up, because spiritual life is more important than this transient physical life we live. God is eternal, we are transient." He said, "The best prayer we can utter is, 'I am so grateful.'"

And then, he concluded, as he does with me many times in these conversations, he says, "I have noticed when I talk to American Unitarians, I realize that for us here in contrast to you there, here in Khasi, Northeast India Unitarianism, God is not a burden." All this is why we take our pilgrimage to India, not only to serve Children Village, our partner that nurtures orphan children into loving, wholesome adults, but also to confront these kinds of questions that I ask myself every time I am there. What is the quality of your spiritual life, Daniel? When do you make time to pray? Where is your gratitude located? What do you notice about the gifts of life and your connection to others and to all infinity? Are you practicing a shared faith that you pursue [foreign language 00:20:28] or spiritual gratification or spiritual grounding? These are the questions that live in me when I go there.

The pilgrim travels intentionally to ask such questions of themselves, to the backyard, to the ancestors' home, to the monuments of the world, to Boston or to India. When we journey with intention with a question to occupy the heart and a willingness to find answers we did not expect to find, we are pilgrims in this life. There's a lot more to say about Unitarian universalism in Northeast India, but I'm going to try to write that book at the end of my sabbatical. I want end with words from Thich Nhat Hanh, who was a Buddhist Vietnamese monk, when he was asked about pilgrimage, he said, "The true gift of pilgrimage is not just the glorious encounter you had there or the people you met, but the capacity to return home and recognize your own backyard as sacred ground."

Because I can only take nine of you at a time every year, applications are due soon for this next year in January's trip, I want to bring Unitarians from the Northeast to you today. Every worship service there ends with a spoken blessing, followed by a sung prayer and an amen, and then silence and nothing more. When I first experienced that, I said to myself, shouldn't we be singing a hymn or hearing a postlude to end the service? But over time, I've realized that the silence, especially that silence I spoke about last week, is the postlude in India, the time to think about those questions that are in your heart. Are you seeking spiritual gratification and grounding? Where do you pray? And for what are you grateful?

And so, we're going to end our service a little differently today. To feel the pilgrimage return to Dallas, there will be no more words or music after a short silence, just an invitation for you to ponder your spirit and then greet us as we go out. So I ask you first, if you're able, to rise in body or spirit now. I will give you the closing blessing, the one I close each service with here, followed by the Khasi blessing, the blessing in the language of Northeast India, followed by the sung blessing, which simply means in English, God be with us, amen. And if you want to join me in singing the amen, please do. And then, it's followed by two or three breaths of silence, and then we will go out. So here we end.

Go in peace, walk softly on your path, and may God shine in you all the days of your life. And they would say [foreign language 00:24:20] God bless you, and peace, joy, deep satisfaction and grounding shall be in our hearts, now and forever [foreign language 00:24:48].

