

Along the Way: A Sermon Series on the Camino Portuguese

Provision without Expectation

By Rev. Ridgley Beckett

Luke 10:25-37 & Genesis 18:1-10

Last month, I preached the opening sermon to this summer's sermon series: Along the Way featuring reflections from my Camino during my sabbatical. Now, if you find yourself asking "What is a Camino?" I encourage you to go back and read or listen to the sermon on July 20th when you get home, but for now here is the cliff notes version:

In January, thanks to a grant, I was able to bike 263km from Porto, Portugal to Santiago de Compostela, Spain on what is called a "Camino"-- a pilgrimage one makes to Santiago de Compostela in Spain via various walking paths throughout Europe that are 1000s of years old. Santiago de Compostela is the destination of all these trails because the remains of St. James the Apostle are in the Cathedral there.

There are many Caminos to Spain—and some people choose to try to walk all of them as a life goal. People from all over the world take to these paths for a variety of personal and religious reasons. There is something that draws people to this pilgrimage, and after having done one, I would have to say, that while people many don't go on their Camino expecting it to be spiritual—God is in fact all over these sacred stones.

The Portuguese Camino that goes from Lisbon all the way to Santiago de Compostela. I journeyed on the last half of that Camino--from Porto to Santiago. To get the official certificate for completing the Camino, one must do the final 100km. Proof of your journey lies in this passport. All the towns, churches and businesses along the way have stamps, and each day, you must obtain two stamps to prove you journey through these villages. Each place has their own unique stamp that represents their church or business.

So, I started my Camino by obtaining my pilgrim passport from a cathedral in Porto. The attendant stamped and handed me my passport, smiled, and said "Bom Camino" which means 'have a good journey' in Portuguese.

The next morning, I organized my suitcase full of Lycra, bike jerseys and rain gear and met the man who dropped off my rental bike for the week. I was scared and excited, not sure what at all to expect. I could grasp what a walk could look like—but I had no idea what riding would be.

After he left, I took a deep breath and took my first pedal stroke of my Camino. I began to smile, and the sense of adventure took ahold of me. I was *really* doing it. Then, it began to pour. hard. I pulled over and put my phone in a Ziploc bag. I laughed to myself as I put my rain jacket on, coming to terms with the fact that in a place as tropical as Portugal, I may have to get used to some showers. Soon the sun came out as I pedaled along boardwalks and gawked at the biggest beach waves I have ever seen in my life. Then, I saw it: the path had a little yellow seashell and an arrow. I stopped for a second, snapped a photo, took a breath and smiled. *I was officially on the Camino.*

For a couple of hours I was taking in the scenery, watching the people, and enjoying the ride, until I saw that the boardwalk no longer allowed bikes. The path I turned on led me to into the woods...that my bike computer said was my trail. The dirt path quickly became...mud. Huge puddles.

I thought about stopping but then realized that I was in it—I had to keep going to get through the wet slop through which I was cycling. At one point the puddle I went through was deeper than expected, the bike slammed down into a hole. By the grace of God, I somehow did not wreck the bike. I took a deep breath, relieved that I was okay and relieved that the path seemed drier ahead. I looked around, I was alone. All I knew was that there was a map and a shell on the ground ahead telling me this was the way to go, but I was skeptical.

Then the panic kicked in-- “What on earth was I thinking doing this ALONE in a foreign country?” I cannot even speak clear Portuguese! I only had a pocket deck of Portuguese words and a well sounded out “Obrigada” to thank people. As I pedaled along, my anxiety started to fade from that subject and fixate on another: I needed these stamps. My guide had said that I would find that churches are sites for you to come, pray, visit, and get a stamp. ‘This is a religious pilgrimage route,’ I thought. ‘Surely I’ll find a church soon.’

The next one I saw, I parked my bike, locked it up, climbed up the steps. Locked. Every door. No sign. Nothing. No one to be seen. It almost seemed comical how many times I did the same thing for the next two hours. I stopped at three churches and all were locked up, no signs, nothing. I was starting to give up on the idea that this somehow would be religious for me. It was a little confusing at first and quite lonely to be in these villages on this “sacred” pilgrimage. I wondered to myself “how can this be a religious pilgrimage for me if the churches are literally closed off?”

My day started to grow long, and the sun was setting soon. I had not really seen many people on my Camino that day and was starting to feel hungry. I looked for a spot to rest and sandwich. I saw an open door that led to a corridor and peaked around the corner. Ooo a person! maybe she can help me with the church dilemma-surely, I was missing something. As soon as I started to greet the woman she came running out.

“Bom Dia! ARE YOU A PILGRIM??? WAIT, YOU’RE BLEEDING!

It turns out when I hit the hole and did not wreck, I completely missed that I had knicked my shin and I was bleeding all down my leg.

Come in! Come in! I will help you. She called her friend from upstairs and shouted to me “let us help you” I parked my bike and decided to stop there, I had not rested all day, and I was...muddy.

As I walked upstairs a gentlemen met me and took me to the front desk shared his name, and his story with me—tears filled his eyes as he shared about his first Camino. He ran to the kitchen and brought out prosciutto and cheese as a woman came in and started cleaning the wound on my shin.

They helped me clean up, fed me, asked me all about my life and shared with me that where I had stopped to ask a question was an “Albergue.” On the Camino there are Albergues that are federally funded hostels with food, laundry facilities, a hospitable place to lay your head and commune with other pilgrims. It was January and I was their first pilgrim of the day. They told me January is the lowest time to visit the Camino, and it was the reason I was not seeing too many people on the trails. They assured me as I got closer to Santiago, I would meet people.

They sat with me, and we shared stories while I ate my PB&J, and they gave me a t-shirt for their hostel. These people were volunteers and their whole job was to wait for people to *help*. To feed, to help clean up, and to give respite to. To me, it felt like I was the reason they were there. For me. I had never been greeted and taken care of by strangers like that in my life. As I was leaving the Albergue, one of the men said to me...have a good journey and have a beautiful life. Tears filled my eyes. I knew I would never see them again and yet...They offered water, a place to sit, a meal, and help with a smile that said, *you belong here*.

When I started my Camino, I thought of myself as just another traveler passing through towns and villages, but the people I met refused to let me stay anonymous. They greeted me as if I were who they were waiting for all along. I realized that living in such an individualized culture like America had hardened my heart. I was so used to existing in a space full of people and interacting with some if needed, that true hospitality was something I rarely opened myself up to.

But this just was not my experience. There are many “sayings” among those who travel on the Camino- one of which is on the front of your bulletin—a stranger is a neighbor you have not met yet.

On the Camino, no one is ever truly a stranger.

What I learned is that the people I met were called hospitaleros—thousands of volunteers, many former pilgrims themselves, who take time out of their schedule to run Albergues, tending to the pilgrims physically and emotionally. Their primary role is that of service, it extends beyond simply providing accommodation, they embody the spirit of the Camino by offering warmth, guidance, and a sense of community to those undertaking the pilgrimage. Their history is deeply rooted in the tradition of hospitality and service to the pilgrims. It dates to the Middle Ages, where hospitality was considered a *sacred duty* and pilgrims were treated as honored guests. On the Camino, hospitality is not about grand gestures but about **presence, provision, and kindness without expectation.**

Hospitality is what links our Old and New Testament readings today. Abraham encountered strangers and treated them as if they were family and entertained God without even knowing it. The parable tells of a Samaritan stopping to help a Jew not because of who he was, but because of what he needed. It did not matter that their cultures were at odds with one another. A man saw his neighbor in need and with no questions asked tended to his wounds, fed him, and showed him love. **presence, provision, and kindness without**

expectation. In these moments in our sacred scriptures, strangers were treated as neighbors, and the love of God was made manifest.

Even though the churches in these villages on my Camino were locked up and cold, I found the warmth of the true church in the walls of an Albergue that day. The stamp, while from a hostel, represented a church to me. It was the first stamp on my pilgrim passport, and the most important one.

I continued my way thinking—This is what the church is meant to be: a journeying community where our identity as neighbors is defined not by proximity, shared background, or agreement, but by love itself.

What would our world look like if we treated each other the way people treat pilgrims on the Camino? In moments when we treat strangers as neighbors with presence, provision and kindness without expectation, God's love is made manifest. Hospitality is the sacred duty not just of those who care for pilgrims on the Camino, it is the sacred duty of us all.

Jesus told a story about a traveler on the road who was helped by someone from the “wrong” community—a Samaritan. The lesson was not just that we should help, but that God's kingdom breaks into the world in those moments of hospitality between strangers.

The Camino teaches this truth in boots and blisters: the Kingdom of God is a world where we care for one another without asking for credentials. It shows up in a sandwich offered on a dusty road, in a bed shared in a crowded dorm, in the gift of being seen and welcomed as you are. That is *church*. Not just a building, but a way of living—hospitality as an act of worship, hospitality as a *sacred duty*. And on the Camino, I learned again that the road is holy when it leads us toward one another.

And when we live like that—here at home, in our neighborhoods, with our co-workers, even with people we disagree with—we all become hospitaleros. May it be so.