

## Traveling Together

In J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings", in a council of delegates from all the free peoples of Middle Earth, Frodo Baggins realizes that he must be the one to bear the One Ring to its destruction and reluctantly volunteers. Elrond, the convenor of the council, says, "I think that must be so. But when you go, do not go alone." So a fellowship is formed of seemingly random people of all races and backgrounds, shapes and sizes, some bringing a clear skill-set to the group, others with no apparent gifts but part of the party anyway. Together, they set off on their quest.

"Do not go alone." That's good advice in a whole lot of situations. Whenever you are setting off into the unknown, it's good to take a friend.

That's particularly true in the Christian life. From the very beginning, the Christian enterprise has been a communal enterprise. Even Jesus didn't try to go it alone. The very first thing Jesus did as he began his ministry was to find people to be his companions and disciples. He found people almost as diverse as the Fellowship of the Ring to travel with him. In the inner circle were fishermen and a tax collector, a radical revolutionary and a twin, and the man who would eventually betray him. The list of women Luke tells us about who stood just outside this inner circle was almost as diverse: mothers and wives of a variety of society's classes.

When the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost, the Spirit didn't come to one lone visionary somewhere in the desert. The Spirit comes to a whole group of people, that very same, very mixed group of people that Jesus had called to be his disciples. That same mixed group of people from different backgrounds with different gifts formed the core of the first church. At the heart of our shared faith since the days of Jesus has been a meal we call communion – communion not only with our Lord, but with one another as well.

For the last month we have been travelling together as followers of the Way on our Lenten journey. For those of us traveling together, this trip is like a

pilgrimage, following along on the pathways of our faith. Take a look around you and see who is traveling with you. There are people you've known for years, and people who are more recent acquaintances. There are some you know well, some you know only by name or face. There are lots of different gifts in this crowd: caring and healing, handling money and organizing things, teaching, cooking, music, carpentry. There are some people you really like and, if you are honest, probably one or two who rub you the wrong way. These are all your fellow travelers, the people God has given you to go with you on this faith journey.

In the movie "The Way", which we watched at this week's Lenten Supper, a man named Tom sets off along the ancient pilgrimage way to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, following the path his son Daniel had intended to take when he died in an accident along the way. He is a man who travels through life alone, and, wrapped in grief, he begins his journey alone, doggedly trudging down the path. Along the way, he meets three fellow travelers, each undertaking the pilgrimage for his or her own reason. They are people who probably wouldn't have been friends in ordinary life, yet there, on pilgrimage, they are bound together. They walk together and talk together, support one another and argue with one another. They become true companions on the way. Both by the pilgrimage itself and by their interactions with one another all four of them, and especially Tom, are opened to relationship, opened to deep places within themselves, opened to a renewed relationship to the holy, and changed forever.

This is a good metaphor for life together in the church. Each of us is here for our own reason. God is working in a particular way in each of our lives. Yet here we are, brought together by seeming coincidence which just may be the call of God. Together, we try our best to walk in Christ's way. We support each other and get in each other's way. We share our gifts, our joys and our sorrows. Sometimes we move ahead by leaps and bounds. Sometimes we stumble or

get lost. But we are called by God to move ahead together, and we are better and stronger together than we are alone.

Now, you've probably heard people say as I have that they are "spiritual but not religious" and that they don't need to go to church to be Christian. Maybe you've even said it yourself at one time or another in your life. I know many of the reasons people say that: the injuries that the church or the people in it have caused over the years, the family stresses and strains that get played out here, the struggles with faith caused by crises for which there seems to be no help, the habits that are so easy to fall out of and so hard to get back into. But I do believe that we are better Christians when we go to church. We find something here with one another that we don't find anyplace else.

In Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, he says "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Each one of us on our own is imperfect or incomplete, yet each one of us has our own individual gifts. It's like being an ear or an eye or a leg or a kidney in a body. You can do your own part. That part is critical to the well-being of the whole. Yet you can only do so much on your own. An eye can't be an ear or a leg. We need one another to get the job of God's work done. We need one another to support each other and hold the whole community together.

But there's still more to it than that. We aren't here just for our own good. We are here because God called us here for a purpose. We are the body of Christ. In her essay "When Spiritual But Not Religious is Not Enough" Lillian Daniels says what we uniquely encounter here is "a community of folks who over thousands of years, have followed a man who was not lucky (in terms of where he lived his life or the privileges he had.) But in the scheme of the church, he was willing to die alongside the unlucky, to be raised from the dead, and to point out in that action that there is much more to life than you could possibly come up with...and in that resurrection, we come to the humbling realization that there are in fact some things we simply cannot do for ourselves. Over the

years human beings in communities like ours have worked together and feuded together and goofed up together, just like that first community of disciples that Jesus called together. And we do it because we are trying to be the body of Christ, utterly human and realistic enough to know we need a savior who is divine. " It is in Christ that we find our identity, our reason for being as a community, and the one who, as the head of the church, directs us on a pilgrimage that is not ours alone.

So we move ahead together on this way to which Christ calls us. We are directed by the mind of Christ, bound together by the love of Christ. When we stumble, we lift one another up. When we wander, we call each other back to faithfulness. We are the body of Christ, grateful for companions on the way. Together, we go farther on Christ's way than we could ever go alone.

