

**July 23<sup>rd</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup>**  
**Pentecost 10**  
**Sermon**

Just days after accepting the call to serve here at Holy Trinity as Assistant Pastor I left the country for three weeks in Europe. I've been saving the story to tell everyone at once and now is my chance. First of all, it wasn't really vacation; it was a pilgrimage. My former Internship supervisor, Dennis, and I planned to walk the last 200km of the medieval pilgrim trail to Santiago de Compostela in the northwest of Spain. It is a popular route, and that part of Spain is renowned for its wine and bread.

You know, I could never do those low carb fad diets; I *love* bread. A good loaf of bread is a wonderful thing. To make dough rise—to make it fluffy and light and all the things that are wonderful about bread—you have to leaven it. One of the parables today—one of that huge list that could take an entire year to preach on—is of the Reign of Heaven being like leaven. Leaven is not yeast. No, in Jesus' day it was old, rotten bread used as starter. It was nasty stuff. For Israel, it was plain bad. At Passover they ate unleavened bread—they weren't even allowed to have leaven in the house. Jesus told his disciples “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.” St. Paul wrote, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump,” a sort of First Century version of our “One bad apple spoils the whole bunch.” This was rotten, impure gook that Jesus was comparing *positively* to the Reign of Heaven. Bizarre. But I'm trying to tell my story here.

We were walking and loving it. I had strained both Achilles Tendons and my left knee but we just kept on pushing. On July 1<sup>st</sup> we were walking from the city of Melide to the city of Arzua, the penultimate leg of the journey, and Dennis was feeling sick. By the time we had reached Arzua he had stopped sweating; he had heatstroke. Heatstroke can be fatal, so this was a dire emergency. I left Dennis sleeping fitfully with a cold, wet rag on his forehead while I began searching for help. My first thought was, “God would not bring us all this way just to let us die.” But, how did I know that? Everybody dies. God calls each of us but the limits of our sinful world mean that sometimes we don’t fulfill their calls. I know God has called me to serve here in Manasquan but that did not mean that it would happen. I was praying that both of us would live through this, knowing that we might not. I don’t know any magic words to make God do what I want. First Kings tells us that King Solomon prayed to God for wisdom to rule God’s people, and that in response for this God gave Solomon all of the other more self-centered things he could have prayed for. Could I really pray for something that would tip God in my favor on everything else? I don’t think so. The story of Solomon’s prayer isn’t about that, anyway.

Prayer is the way we communicate with God. Communication cannot exist as a one way venture. All parties must be involved for communication to work. At the information center in Arzua I repeatedly asked where the bus stop was. However, the woman working there kept asking me if I was a pilgrim, if I wanted my credentials stamped, or if I wanted to find the pilgrim hostel. The woman did

not understand what I was talking about. We simply did not communicate. It is much the same with prayer. If we are not listening to God or are asking for things that simply are nowhere on God's list of things to do then we're not really communicating.

Solomon asks God for what he needs to be the king that God has called him to be. He's on the same page with God. The lines of communication are open, and because they are open Solomon is able to enjoy the other blessings that God gives him. In this way Solomon's prayer was very much like the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught us. In this prayer we ask that God give us what we need to live through the day, that God's will be done no matter what, that God forgive us while reminding us to be forgiving. We put ourselves at a lot of risk with that prayer. We risk that God's will might not be our will. We acknowledge that we are taking a big chance on letting God handle everything.

That's what happens in the Reign of Heaven: God handles everything. The Reign of Heaven is like a treasure having been hidden in a field, which a person found and hid, and in his joy he goes and sells all, as much as he has, and buys that field. We can do nothing to earn the grace of God. We stumble upon it as that person stumbled upon the treasure. It takes incredible risk on our part to enjoy that treasure, that grace. Yet, communication is not a one way street, and in giving grace God has taken an incredible risk on us. Again, the Reign of Heaven is like some merchant seeking good pearls, and finding one expensive pearl he went and sold all, as much as he had, and bought it. In the life and ministry of Jesus the

Christ, and in his crucifixion and death, God risks everything, as that merchant did, in order to save us. God risks all of God's unfathomable power and wisdom to take on the form of a finite creature in order to give us the grace that we need to survive.

Friends of Christ, God has taken an incredible chance on us. If the universe were a high stakes poker game then we are God's hand and God has bet everything on us. It is ours now to take a chance on God. We took a lot of chances on food in Spain, but the bread was indeed *wonderful*. It was all leavened. It was ritually impure, but quite frankly it was what I needed to survive. Without that leaven, without the Reign of Heaven, I wouldn't be alive. What does it mean when we say that the Reign of Heaven is like a lump of rotten leaven? Consider this. Our savior, Jesus the Christ, died the most rotten death you could in those days. He was nailed to a tree in a humiliating public spectacle of a death. Yet by the Cross of Christ God saved the world. That old rotten Cross, that old rotten leaven, is our rallying point. It is the place where the love of God, where the Reign of Heaven, is revealed to us. A little leaven leavens the whole lump, and the Cross of Christ is good for everyone forever. We know we're taking a chance on God, and God is taking a chance on us, but in the Cross of Christ and in his resurrection we have the assurance that this really isn't a gamble. The cross leavens us all, and we are bound to that cross as bread is bound to leaven—no one can take it away from us.

I should probably tell you how the walk ended. We got what we needed to survive. By the grace of God we got Dennis' temperature down and his fluids and blood sugar up. I took command and canceled the rest of the walk. We took a bus the next day to Santiago. The pilgrim's reward for completing the pilgrimage is a certificate that says you've done it—the Roman Catholic Church considers this a plenary indulgence, or forgiveness for everything. We didn't get ours. Dennis was denied his because he was unable to finish the walk. I was denied mine because they accused me of being part of a group of Americans who'd come in the previous day after riding a bus the whole way. I did not enjoy having a woman at the pilgrim office foisting a false biography onto me, but you know what? By the grace of God Dennis and I both lived through it, and I know that the indulgence I was denied is little more than a slip of paper. God's forgiveness is mine, and it is yours, through that little bit of leaven, that rotten Cross of Christ, through which God's endless love and forgiveness is revealed to us all, free of charge. Amen.