

Solvitur Ambulando
Sunday March 21, 2021

“Solvitur Ambulando,” the title of my sermon this morning, is a Latin phrase meaning “It is solved by walking.” People attribute it to Saint Augustine in the 4th century, but no one really knows who said it first or how long ago. But there’s a reason it’s still quoted. For so many things are solved by walking! Walking is first a form of locomotion - it’s how we get from one place to another. Until recent centuries, other than by boat or horse, it was the primary way people traveled, and is still the way people in many parts of the world - and this country - get to work, to school, bring water back to their village. For those of us who are now more sedentary, walking is a way to exercise. How many of us aim for 10,000 steps or more each day? But walking is also a way to think, to reflect, to notice, and to connect. Do you walk when you are trying to think through a situation? When you are seething over an argument? When you are sad and need to lift your spirits? When you are happy and need to move to express your joy? We walk to see what is happening in nature and in our community, as well as to understand what is happening within ourselves.

When people ask me what it takes to write a sermon, I tell them, “Reading, conversation, and a walk.” William Wordsworth was known for composing his poems as he walked. Once, a visitor to his home asked a servant if the room she had been shown into, filled with books and a desk, was the poet’s study. “This is his library,” she answered. “His study is outdoors.”

Walking shows us our world, both the exterior one and the interior one, in new ways. The change of scene, the rhythmic motion, the space to clear one’s head all open us to insight. As I’ve written in the newsletter, I’m trying to walk every day as part of a virtual pilgrimage of the Camino del Santiago, the Way of St. James. This is part of my journey back to health after three years of illness but also a journey of connection after this year of isolation. While pilgrimage is a journey for the self, it’s also a journey with others. Even the pilgrim who travels alone meets others on the journey, walking with them for a time, sharing a meal, exchanging stories. In the 3 weeks that I’ve been walking and inviting people to walk with me, we’ve talked about subjects from anxiety to art, from fear to flowers, and septic systems to parenting. I hope you’ll consider joining me for a walk in the coming months. Who knows where the conversation will go!

Pilgrimages often follow a time of upheaval - they are a way of claiming space between - between a time of illness and a return to health, as Suleika Jaouad wrote about in her memoir *Between Two Kingdoms*; between the end of a marriage and a life unpartnered, as Cheryl Strayed wrote about in her memoir *Wild*; or between the end of schooling and the beginning of adult life, as Patrick Leigh Fermor chronicled in his classic memoirs *A Time of Gifts* and *Between Woods and Water*. At the end of this year of pandemic, when so much of the way we lived has been called into question, it’s no

wonder that we too seek this liminal space, this space between, to reflect on how much of the old ways we really want to take forward with us into the new. And so we have been walking and we continue to walk.

Walking is also a metaphor for our life together as a church. Every week we say together the covenant of First Parish. It reminds us of our promise to walk together in the ways of truth, the ways of care, the ways of justice, and the ways of service. This covenant is recent to our congregation, but some covenant has tied us together - kept us walking together - for nearly 400 years. I haven't been able to find a record of our original covenant from 1634, but if it was anything like the covenants of some of the other Puritan churches in New England, it may even have used the word "walk" to describe what we do.

Here's the covenant of the First Church in Salem from 1629. Like our congregation, that church was originally gathered by Puritans and now is Unitarian Universalist.

*We Covenant with the Lord and one with another,
And doe bynd our selves together in the presence of God,
To walke together in all His waies,
According as he is pleased to reveale him self unto us,
In his Blessed word of truth.*

Though their theological language, like ours, has changed over the years, they still use this covenant to keep them walking together in the ways of justice, kindness, and humility. It still works because it's not about belief in theological concepts. It doesn't matter that the people in the pews today don't understand God in the same way their ancestors in that place did or that they don't understand God the same way as the person in the pew next to them. The crux of the covenant are the words "We... doe bynd our selves... to walke together." We commit to walk together, not to believe together.

This of course can create tensions. We are human. Sometimes we forget that there are many ways to walk together. Some march in protest. Some follow the paths of learning. Some take the pilgrimage of prayer and meditation. Some dance their worship. Walking together doesn't mean we all follow the same route or take the same steps. We walk together sharing stories of our journeys, inspiring and informing each other's walks when we come together each week and at other times. Sometimes we are in step; sometimes one takes a different path; sometimes a new person joins us. We come together to offer the richnesses of our journeys to one another, feeding each other as we live out - or walk through -

our faith.

And the way we walk together here shapes the way we walk in the world. The pandemic has highlighted the question of how our nation walks together. This Tuesday, for instance we have two anniversaries this Tuesday of highs and lows in our country's journey:

A high point: March 23 is the eleventh anniversary of the Affordable Care Act, which extended health care coverage to nearly 32 million Americans. That act grew out of our understanding that our walk together includes caring for the health of all.

A low: March 23 is also the day in 1942 when the U.S. government began forcibly relocating Japanese Americans from their homes on the West Coast to internment camps. Approximately 120,000 people were detained in this way over the course of three years. This action shows how we still exclude people from our walk, and the killing this week of eight people in Atlanta, all but one of them of Asian descent, shows how damaging this exclusion is. Let's remember them now: Hyun Jung Grant.... Xiaojie Tan... Daoyou Feng... Delaina Ashley Yaun... Suncha Kim... Soon Chung Park... Yong Ae Yue... and Paul Andre Michels.

Their lives and their deaths and the suffering of so many people today and throughout our nation's history push us here in this small church to remember the importance of the walk we do. As we walk with people with whom we disagree, with people we find difficult, with people who push us to question our assumptions, along with those who comfort us, encourage us, and make us laugh - and often the same person at times falls in both categories - as we walk here, we learn to walk better in the world and we model for others how to walk with people whom they have assumed are too different to walk beside them.

Our conversation this afternoon isn't just about whether or not to hang a banner on the church, it's a question of how we will continue to walk together, of who our walk includes, of where we want the journey to take us. Really it's about our 21st century answer to the question which brought our Puritan ancestors to this country - why do we walk? What are we looking to solve? These questions have come up over and over in our church's 387 years of walking. May today's conversation lead us into ever more broad and fruitful paths.

Each week we're offering a ritual practice to help us heal. This week I invite you to try walking meditation. It's not difficult. You can do it inside or out. You don't even have to be able to get up and walk - you could do it from a chair or even lying in bed. And if you can't move your feet, you can practice this in your mind. The Buddhist monk and meditation teacher Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "The first thing to do is to lift your foot. Breathe in. Put your foot down in front of you, first your heel

and then your toes. Breathe out. Feel your feet solid on the Earth. You have already arrived. As you walk, notice beauty. Or offer love to yourself or someone who needs it - that could be someone you know or people whose situation touches your heart. Breathe, walk, and notice. Perhaps take your piece of beach glass or a stone with you - the weight of it in your hand can be a reminder to refocus on the present moment when your attention wanders. Continue to breathe, walk, and notice. Solvitur ambulando. It will be solved by walking.

Let's now celebrate this first full day of Spring by singing Rising Green. This video of the hymn was made by the Grand Valley UU Church in Grand Junction, Colorado.