

## 'Pilgrimage'

The Rev. Drew Willard  
Temple Shalom, Oxford, FL  
November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016  
*Community Thanksgiving*

*And the time had come for Jesus to be taken up into Heaven;*

*So he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*

*Mark 9:51*

Let us pray... O Holy One with many names, but of the one Spirit of Compassion,  
Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Amen

It was not so long ago that

the congregation of the United Church of Christ at The Villages  
worshipped here at Temple Shalom.

August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010 was our last service here with many  
of the synagogue's congregation in attendance.

Then we walked down the street – early on that August morning while it was  
still cool – or somewhat cool-*er*, as we carried our cross, Bible, and chalice.

It was a wonderful procession – probably about 100 people;

And many of our Jewish friends walked with us that day –  
including Laura Doucette who fell on the road,  
but still made it to the church.

We were all gathered in the vestibule that we call our Narthex

and that is where Rose Eberle, the synagogue's music director  
led our friends from Temple Shalom to sing for us a song of blessing.

For years, Rose and our music director Monica Peidl worked together  
with our blended choirs to present special music for  
this Community Thanksgiving Service.

Monica passed away this year and Rose is now Rabbi Rose  
having moved on to serve another congregation.

So these days, our Mike West is working with the Temple's Michelle Uss  
to continue this community co-operative effort.

That first service in our new church building began with a procession  
of the choir and our deacons carrying palm branches  
like we Christians generally do on Palm Sunday to recall  
Jesus entering Jerusalem.

We also celebrated our first Holy Communion then  
which our Jewish guests observed;

and at the end of the service, Sheldon Skurow,  
the Spiritual Leader of Temple Shalom, gave the benediction  
before we all shared oatmeal cookies and grape juice  
in what is called an agape feast for everybody to share.

Willard, p.2

That walk we did was inspired by the walk those of you from Temple Shalom had done when you carried your Torah – your Bible, 4 miles from the Oxford Methodist church on CR 446 & SR 301 where you had been meeting for worship until this building was ready. Such a walk, I learned, is called a *kadimah* – or pilgrimage, a faith journey.

Pilgrimage –

The tradition of ‘pilgrimage’ can be found in each of the Abrahamic religions. Abrahamic – meaning any religion “related to Abraham”.

That is a fancy phrase for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – though it can also include other religions that derive their origins from those three like the Unitarian Universalists and the Baha’i.

Called the *hajj* – Muslims are expected to make the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once in their lifetime,

in solidarity with all the ethnic people of the world who are Muslim.

The experience of the hajj had a profound effect on the American black Muslim, Malcolm X who later said about his experience:

*There were tens of thousands of pilgrims,  
from all over the world.*

*They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans.*

*But we were all participating in the same ritual,  
displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood  
that my experiences in America had led me to believe  
never could exist between the white and the non-white.*

*America needs to understand Islam,*

*because this is the one religion that erases from its society  
the race problem.*

*You may be shocked by these words coming from me.*

*But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced,  
has forced me to rearrange much of my thought patterns  
previously held.*

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hajj>

I was doing kind of a pilgrimage myself back in 2010,

coming up from the Tampa Bay-area on weekends to do focus groups with the congregation of UCC at The Villages as their prospective pastor.

One time I was invited up by Nancy Bell to see a performance

of her readers theater adaptation of The Faith Club, at Hope Lutheran Church,

The Faith Club is the story of three women, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim

who wrote a book about their dialogues together,

exploring their faith and traditions as a response to the events of 9/11.

Willard, p.3

In the question & answer period that followed,  
it was the first time I saw and heard Imam Abdurrahman Sykes  
respond to the impassioned and ardent questioning of Ed Ziegler –  
both people I have come to appreciate.

In the years since, I have had many opportunities to work with  
Imam Sykes and Sheldon Skurow in such interfaith projects  
as tonight's service.

The first time we did something together was when I invited them to participate  
in a "Peace Sunday Service" in the summer of 2010.

There had been a national call for Christian churches to – at the very least,  
include a scripture reading from another religion  
as a response to Gainesville church that threatened to  
burn a copy of the Qur'an in protest to Muslim violence.

We figured Muslims and Jews worshipping together with Christians  
was a more effective alternative.

Sheldon, Abdul, and myself have done four such combined services –  
where Protestant Christian worship liturgy allows flexibility  
for such a thing.

At my church, we have now instituted these services as "Love Sunday" –  
the Third Sunday in Advent when we light the third Advent wreath candle.

These experiences were helpful in shaping the quarterly interfaith prayer services  
initiated last summer by the Interfaith Prayer Partners led by  
David O'Brien of St. Timothy Roman Catholic Church –  
as well as tonight's Community Thanksgiving Service.

As I said, pilgrimages as journeys of faith are significant  
in the Judeo, Christian, and Islamic traditions.

Abraham & Sarah leaving the land of Ur – present day Iraq,  
to find the promised land of Canaan.

Moses leading the Hebrews across the Red Sea and through the wilderness  
back to the Holy Land.

Jesus sending out his disciples as he made his way to face  
his destiny of crucifixion and resurrection in Jerusalem.

Christians in the millennia that have followed, venturing out  
to go on Pilgrimage Outremer – 'pilgrimage beyond the sea'.

Mohammad instituted the hajj by making the journey to Mecca himself  
as an example to be followed.

In the United Church of Christ, we say,

"No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,  
you are welcome here."

Willard, p.4

Long before I was ever called to be pastor here, my congregation has been using this as a greeting of welcome at the start of each Sunday morning service:  
“No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey,  
you are welcome here.”

I love the expression and it characterizes a very important part of our shared journey of faith as the United Church of Christ at The Villages. Isn’t it true for any of us that the hardest journey is the journey from the head to the heart...

As Americans, we have a worthy legacy from the Protestant Europeans who were called ‘the Pilgrims’ – coming to the New World to find religious freedom.

Suffering privations that left half of them dead, three months after their arrival, the English pilgrims were helped by an Indian interpreter named Samoset to form an alliance with the native Wampanoags that would last 50 years. They succeeded because of the personal relationship of trust and friendship that was established between their principle leaders, including Massasoit and John Carver.

The same has been true about the success of our interfaith projects together – they succeed because Abdul, Sheldon, and I know and trust each other, and it is our hope that new friendships will be formed and forged to build on what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the ‘beloved community’. Finding companions on the path leading to mutuality and respect and a willingness to be open to discovery are what it takes to reach that goal of beloved community...

Things have been pretty serious in our world lately, so let me close with a cautionary tale about trust and staying on the right path. This story comes from Native American storyteller Dovie Thomason about a walk in the woods...

Willard, p.5

Indian Boy was walking down the forest path when he heard:

*Whippoor-will... Whippoor-will... Whippoor-will...*

He said,

“That’s Whippoorwill singing his song. I never heard him singing before.

I think I’ll go visit with him.”

So off he went and soon after, came to a fork in the road,

where he saw Coyote singing his song:

*“Aroo! Aroo! Ar-ar-aroo!”*

Indian Boy said,

“Uh-oh, Coyote...” but it was too late. Coyote had already seen him.

Coyote said,

“Say, Indian Boy. Where do you think yer goin’?”

[He sounded just like Jack Nicholson – this is not a good sign.]

Indian Boy said,

“Why hello, Coyote. I was on my way to hear Whippoorwill sing his song.”

Coyote said,

“Well, why doncha stay here awhile and listen to me sing my song?”

Indian Boy said,

“I never heard Whippoorwill sing before and... well, I already heard your song.”

Coyote didn’t want to hear this, so he said,

“Well, I know a short cut to where Whippoorwill sings. C’mon!”

So off the trail they went

[This also was not a good sign...].

They went down a steep ravine and over sharp rocks and through brambles,

and it took them all afternoon to get to where Whippoorwill – was!

Coyote didn’t see any point in sticking around, so off he went down the path,

singing his song:

*“Aroo! Aroo! Ar-ar-aroo!”*

Indian Boy looked around for the softest rock he could find

and sat down on it to clean up his bruises, scrapes, and scratches.

Then he realized he had learned two things that day:

Number one –

There’s no shortcut to what you really want in life, and

Number two –

Watch out for coyote!

And stay on the Path...

Amen