

# Christ Presbyterian Church

Edina, Minnesota

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Pausing on the Pilgrimage

Hebrews 11-12

Well, while Pentecost, our combined service, the walk, and the picnic are going on here, the rest of the world is celebrating Father's Day. I went to get my coffee this morning and my barista friend Theo said, "Happy Father's Day." I had forgotten that that was the case. Then he came back with my coffee and said, "Pastor John, would you pray for my father. He has been dead 21 years today and I think of him often." I thought it would be a neat idea to begin our time today in God's Word by thanking God for all the fathers everywhere who are trying their best.

Lord, Jesus, You had a special relationship with Your father, far better than many of us have with our fathers or our children, yet marked by that same love and the desire that our children would be blessed and that our fathers would know that they are loved. So in the name of Evangelos John Zambetakis of Tanzania, 21 years in heaven today, I pray that You will bless all fathers and that You will speak to us that we might be on that same journey of life that is really life. In Your great Name. Amen.

As Brad pointed out, next week starting this coming Wednesday actually, we want to make the first half of our summer focus on the building blocks of our faith by looking at those things that are essential to being a follower of Jesus. Today, however, falls between our series on Philippians and the building block series, and I want to tie it to the idea of the whole church gathered together. It is very rare that we all have the chance to see people that we don't recognize, but when the church gathers together it becomes a colony of heaven, a little post far from the doors of heaven showing what heaven might be like one day. I want to talk about that together as we head out into the summer. I was talking to a friend recently, saying that our service attendance through June and July and especially in August goes down 20, 30, 40, 45 percent. I said, "The first year I was very offended, but after the second year I was like, 'Well, can I leave, too?'" I mean, really, if they didn't pay me to be here.... But we need the summer time here. We need to lie fallow and take a different pace and go places so that we come back, refreshed and ready to jump in. I would like to give all of us some verses for our summer travels, for the roads of summer that you travel in faith. Listen to what the author of the Hebrews says.

<sup>1</sup> Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. <sup>2</sup> This is what the ancients were commended for. <sup>3</sup> By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

<sup>4</sup> By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain.... And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead....

<sup>6</sup> And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to God must believe that not only God exists but that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

<sup>7</sup> By faith Noah... built an ark.... <sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham, when called to go... got up and left, even though he did not know where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith Abraham made his home ...like a stranger in a foreign country; in tents, as his children lived.... <sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

By faith Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children. And by faith Moses and by faith David and by faith Daniel and by faith Rahab and by faith Deborah and by faith all the prophets, they all lived and died by faith.

<sup>13</sup> ...They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. <sup>14</sup> People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

That is Hebrews 11. Hebrews 12 says,

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith....

<sup>3</sup> Keep looking at Jesus who endured such opposition so that you will not grow weary and lose heart....

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. <sup>13</sup> “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

And now go out into your summer by faith. Pilgrims and the tourists as we saw in the children’s sermon go out together. They go out on the same roads. They go all over the world. How can you tell the difference between a pilgrim and a spiritual tourist? Maybe you experience the reality of some of each. How can you come back next fall more of a pilgrim and less of a tourist?

Well, I think it starts with your schedule. We are scheduled people. We program everything including our vacations. We will be these days in North Dakota, and we will be these days in Florence, and we will be these days in Mexico, and we will be these days up at the lake. Schedules aren’t everything. They break the normal routine for us. But for tourists, when a schedule gets interrupted, it is a distraction. It is an annoyance. It is a frustration because you are taking time away from the good times. It is stopping us from seeing the gravesites, from getting the photos that mark these moments. The golden moments are interrupted, and that is bad. The first difference between a tourist and a pilgrim is that pilgrims are learning that the interruptions *are* the photo opportunities. Distractions *become* the golden moments as they learn to see the world God is seeing. The times when we are knocked off schedule can actually become times where God speaks to you and me most clearly.

I saw this in Africa last month. We were in Moyo, the middle of nowhere of Zambia. It takes two hours out of Livingston to get to this small town. It takes another hour to get up where you go off the road for another hour plus. We had been on this rutted path for what felt like hours. I was in the first vehicle. We came over a hump and I looked down and saw a guy on the side of the road with his bicycle and he was throwing up. We were going, “Oh, man!” Alcoholism is rampant. “Oh, man!” But our driver stops as this guy is on his hands and knees throwing up. The World Vision woman leans out and starts talking as he was throwing up. I could understand that the conversation was expressing frustration and then concern. Finally we started up again, and

somebody said, "What was that about?" knowing we still had another 45 minutes to go. She said, "Well, he has malaria and he biked an hour to the clinic, but the clinic doesn't have any more anti-malaria medicine, so he is on his way to the other clinic, and he just had to stop to throw up."

It changed my whole idea of what is important about my schedule. You are going to have those moments. Somebody is going to call at just the wrong time. Somebody is going to invite themselves over to dinner, or somebody is going to want to have an extra night with you at the cabin. Somebody is.... well, you finish the sentence. It is going to interrupt your schedule, and you can decide then, "Will I be a tourist and look for the photo op, the golden good time, or will I let God interrupt me and have that become a time that is holy?" So when was the last time an interruption became a holy moment for you and what will mark your summer?

Schedules start everything off, but usually you can tell the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim most easily by their appearance. I asked somebody to give me a little help with the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim. There are a couple of marks. The clearest mark of a tourist is this. (*John is handed a camera.*) All of us have seen these all over the world. We have held them and fumbled with them and cursed them and made sure that the batteries were ready to go so we could have the best picture. That is the mark of a tourist. We are easy to spot, marked by cameras and loud voices.

Pilgrims are usually in the background. They have a different standard. I brought this out because although the walking stick for pilgrims was a protection, it was also a sign that you needed help. A cane is a sign that you are old, but a walking stick is a sign that you need help to get along the path. A tourist church is pretty easy to spot. There are a lot of them. They are filled with people who look really good. Nice cars in the parking lot. Beautiful buildings. Beautiful people inside. Pilgrim churches can look exactly the same but with this difference. The people inside them are not trying to be the beautiful people. They are not trying to be tourists. The other day a friend of mine was talking about a church that he had just been at. He said it was a dead church. You walk in, but the Spirit had fled. Nobody was there for anything other than doing their religious duty and getting out to their nice car. He said, "I felt spiritual death all over. Then I heard the babble of voices and smelled cigarette smoke. There was an AA group down in the basement that had not gotten the memo that they were not supposed to smoke." He said, "I went down there and saw their lives."

Tourists are people who look good on the outside but even when they are in church, they are in danger of becoming hollow on the inside. Pilgrims are people who look messed up and broken on the outside, but by banding together with other people who are allowed to have doubts and fears and sins and pain and mess in their lives, bringing all that brokenness together, God begins to heal us. So this summer, think of this. Are you looking for a place to have great looking pictures of a great looking you or are you about finding other broken folks just like you who can be made whole?

Pilgrims. Tourists. It will make a difference when you get home at the end of the summer because that is the end of the difference between tourists and pilgrims, when you get home. When does it end? Tourists can't wait to get out of town. Once they are out of town, tourists can't wait to get home. Pilgrims are far from home. They aren't sure when they are going to get back because they are going someplace they have never been. They are setting up tents along the way. That is what the author of the Hebrews says.

<sup>13</sup> ....They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

It says of them, the world was not worthy.

<sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one.

We are all searching for home. But are you a tourist or a pilgrim as you search? One of the friends of this church, Rich Stearns, the president of World Vision, says he believes most people spend their lives looking for one of three kingdoms. He says, “The first is the American kingdom where we spend the most time thinking about what we talked about in the children’s sermon, the Magic Kingdom. We want to end up in the Magic Kingdom. It is a beautiful place. Everything runs on time. Everybody is happy. It is wonderfully organized. You can eat whatever you want. It is a little snapshot of heaven on earth. It is like a dream where dreams come true. Smiles are all around us. If you get to the Magic Kingdom, you win, and many of us are going there.

Many of the rest of us are trying to escape what Rich calls the Tragic Kingdom, not the Magic Kingdom, but the Tragic Kingdom where life feels like a nightmare, whether it is around us, divorce, or kids whose lives are messed up, or a house that you are going to lose, or a job that you don’t have, or a bad medical report card. The Tragic Kingdom comes home close to us, but most of us have very little idea of what the Tragic Kingdom really entails. If you went on the walk today, you know. In the Tragic Kingdom, 700 million children go to bed hungry. In the Tragic Kingdom less than 5 percent of all the children impacted by AIDS have access to medical care. In the Tragic Kingdom, they know that there is no justice so they pray for mercy. Tourists shoot for the Magic Kingdom and try to run away from the Tragic Kingdom.

Pilgrims go through both places. Sometimes we are in great places, sometimes we are in terrible places, but pilgrims realize that there is a third kingdom, the Kingdom of Jesus, and we take a narrow road to get there. The folks who get there experience life the way it was meant to be, not perfect. Broken transparent people find love and grace and forgiveness and hope on the way to the kingdom that really matters. In the kingdom that really matters, the Lord Jesus keeps stopping for us on the way and saying, “Come on! Come on! Come on!” When we go as pilgrims to the Magic Kingdom, we say, “Those are dreams. Come to real life.” When we go to the Tragic Kingdom, we reach out our hands and care and hope and love and say, “Come on! Something better is there.”

What will mark your summer? It is fun to be a tourist for a day but it is a bad way to live. What will mark your summer? We ask you to join us here even beginning this hour and at our picnic feast afterwards. Join us on the narrow road following King Jesus to a new home, bringing life and healing and transparency every step of the way.

Lord Jesus, we have put out a call for people to come not as tourists but as pilgrims, not strong but weak. We ask that You would lead us, and pick us up when we fall and bring us back when we get lost and that You would feed us along the way. We ask You to take this juice and turn it into Your Precious Blood and take this bread and break it like You broke Your Body that it might become a whole meal and giving of life that is really life. In Your Name, Lord Jesus. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*