

Interdependence Day July 3, 2022

When I was in college, I found myself going through a spiritually dry period one fall. I decided to spend a bit of time reconnecting with God and caring for myself. As our fall break approached, I decided to take advantage of the week off from classes to go for a walking pilgrimage.

My school was near the Main Line, and I plotted a walking course from there to Lancaster. My route was roughly 50 miles long and would take 3 days to hike. Once I got to Lancaster, I would take the train back to my college.

I planned out everything. I packed food and clothing for each day; I packed a tent and sleeping bag. I brought some money for the train, plus a little extra. I had a Bible and some printed lyrics to my favorite hymns. I booked camping sites along the way for the 2 nights I would be out. I planned everything, and all that I needed would be in my pack.

So I set out. And right from the start, the going was tough. Despite my having planned how much food and water I would need, I found that my rations never really satisfied my hunger and thirst; I was always hungry. My pack was much heavier than I anticipated, and so I took more frequent breaks, which meant my progress was slower than planned. Things were not going smoothly.

A couple times on the first day, folks driving past offered me rides in their cars. They probably saw this lanky kid struggling under the weight of his pack, cluelessly looking at a map, and they took pity on me. But I declined the offers; partially because I didn't want to get in a car with a stranger, but mostly because I wanted to do this on my own. I wasn't going to depend on the hospitality of strangers; I was capable of making this pilgrimage myself.

Day two was not any better. My back and feet were now killing me; my food was running low. And despite having filled my water bottle at the campsite, I was quickly running out of water. But still I walked on, turning down rides from good Samaritans. I sang my hymns; I took pictures of God's beauty. I was on a pilgrimage.

In the heat of the day that 2nd day, I decided to change out of the pants I was wearing into shorts. I did so in the woods, and I strapped my pants onto my pack and continued hiking. Several hours later, I stopped to rest... only to discover that my pants had fallen out of my pack, along with my wallet.

Well, I retraced my steps until I found my pants about 100 yards away from where I changed. My wallet, though, had fallen out elsewhere. At that point, I was out of water and almost out of food. I slowly started walking again, and there was a man standing outside of his house, watering his garden with a hose. I asked him if I could have a drink of water from the hose. He gave me the once-over, and he very graciously told me to wait a minute. He went into the house and brought out a glass of ice water, which he gave to me. I could have hugged him, but instead I drank it down.

More shenanigans followed that day, including a run-in with the Coatesville police, which I'll share with you some other time. I became very clear that there was no way I was making it to my planned campground that evening.

So I gave up. I called my friend at school and asked him to drive the hour to pick me up. And he very graciously did just that. I failed to make it to Lancaster. I failed to have a wonderful, revelatory experience with God on my pilgrimage.

But something that humbled me was realizing how dependent I had to be on other people. Despite my packing everything I needed, despite my desire to do this alone and without relying on anyone else, I still found people on whom I depended (or could have depended). Those folks who offered me rides; the man who gave me water; my friend who picked me up. A few days later, I received a phone call from a man whose daughter had found my wallet. The man mailed the wallet back to me, with all the cash in it. Human beings can be wonderful. But to be so dependent on other people was uncomfortable; it was humbling; and it was eye-opening.

I have several friends who have also gone on walking pilgrimages. Some have walked the Camino de Santiago, a trail in northern Spain that spans hundreds of miles. Other friends have walked most or all of the Appalachian Trail. What they shared is that, no matter how well you plan, you always end up depending on others. And so there is a slogan for the Camino among the pilgrims, "The Camino provides."

But it is uncomfortable. We don't like to be dependent on others, do we? We like to be self-sufficient. We like to be our own person, not needing anybody else.

Today, we hear two stories in our Bible passages. The first is about a man named Naaman. Naaman is a general of the army of Aram. He is a self-made man. But he's a leper. Naaman hears one day that there's a holy man in Israel who can heal him, and Naaman swallows his pride and goes to find this holy man, with the blessing of the king.

Imagine how difficult that must have been to Naaman. He is fabulously rich, as we hear; he commands thousands of soldiers in the army; and he has to show up at a stranger's door and ask for help. He has to depend on a stranger.

But Naaman does it. He goes to Elisha's house. And Elisha doesn't even come out to meet him! Elisha's messenger tells Naaman to go wash himself in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman is furious. He has swallowed his pride and come all this way, only to be told to take a bath. Naaman, we hear, wanted a grand sign! A ceremony with lightning and a voice from heaven! But he gets a secondhand command from a servant.

Eventually, Naaman's servants convince him to follow the instructions. Once he washes, Naaman finds that his skin is cleansed. The story ends with Naaman praising God and trying to pay Elisha through his messenger, but the messenger refuses. Naaman has received a wonderful gift. In throwing himself at the feet of a stranger, he is healed and his faith is transformed.

Our Gospel story tells us another story of dependence. Jesus sends out 70 of his followers to go into towns all around the region to prepare the way for him. And we hear Jesus' detailed instructions. "I'm sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Don't take money, any bag or possessions, not even sandals. Stay with whomever offers you lodging, and don't look around for better accommodations."

In other words, "Become wholly dependent on the hospitality of other people. You are not independent. You are not self-sufficient. You must be humble and reliant on others, just as you must be humble and reliant on God. And if people welcome you, great; tell them the Kingdom of God is here. If they don't welcome you, leave, and tell them the Kingdom of God is here."

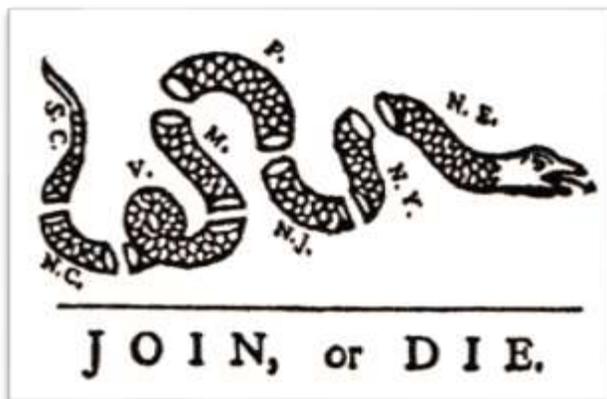
Later, the 70 come back, and they are flying high, feeling great. Their mission was a success; they went and stayed with people. They healed folks and cast out demons. Their courage paid off. Their risk of relying on others paid off.

It seems to me that Jesus is teaching his disciples a lesson (through experience). It is not only humbling to place yourself at the mercy of other people; there is something sacred about depending on others. You come to realize how little control you actually have, and how we all (in some way) depend on others and others depend on us. We like to believe that we are self-sufficient, but no matter how hard we try, we find that there are always areas in which we need the help of others.

Even Paul talks about this in Galatians. "Bear one another's burdens." "Don't get me wrong," Paul says. "You've got to work. All must carry their own loads. But ultimately, at some point you will need help, so make sure you help those who need it."

We are created to live in community. We need human interaction to be healthy. But more than that, we need to know that someone has our back when we need help, and we do our best to cover the backs of our friends and family. We need to depend on others, even if it feels a little uncomfortable.

It's a little ironic that I'm preaching on the value of dependence today, on this holiday weekend when we celebrate Independence Day. As a country, we value independence and personal autonomy. But it's worth pointing out that we are celebrating gaining our independence from an oppressive foreign country that was taxing us without giving us fair representation. We celebrate our independence from tyranny. But of course, we were only able to succeed in gaining independence because the 13 colonies banded together and depended on one another. There is the famous political cartoon by Ben Franklin of a snake divided into several pieces, each representing a colony, and the caption, "Join or die."



National Constitution Daily. "The story behind the Join or Die snake cartoon." May 9, 2022.
<https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/the-story-behind-the-join-or-die-snake-cartoon>

I think our goal is not independence, not self-sufficiency to the point of isolation, but interdependence. Our goal is to know the humility and yes, even discomfort, of depending on another person, and hopefully we can support others when they depend on us.

Happy Independence Day. Happy Dependence Day.

Amen.

Copyright © 2022 Rev. Andrew VanBuren. All rights reserved.