

Running Around in Circles

My mind, in case you haven't noticed it before, wanders; the difference this summer is that, like the French on vacation, my body has also wandered. Among other places, I traveled to Angers, the beautiful city in the Loire valley where, 40+ years ago, I had my first experience of France. In a sense, with this pilgrimage - where I was able to rediscover the sites where I honed my grasp of French language, culture, and history - my life as a linguist has come full circle.

While there, I stayed at a hostel run by the Good Shepherd Sisters. Taking advantage of the cool of the evening, I was able to go out into their garden to walk a labyrinth. You may be asking: what's that? Well, it's kind of like a corn maze which some of you may enjoy walking, and getting lost in, at harvest time. The difference is that the purpose of this labyrinth is not to get you lost, but rather to actually get you somewhere.

You see, the labyrinth is modeled on those sometimes found traced in the floors of medieval cathedrals. By walking the labyrinth, pilgrims unable physically to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem were able to simulate the journey, except that the journey was spiritual rather than geographical: by praying or meditating as they made their circular way from Alpha to Omega – i.e., from beginning to end – the pilgrims would seek an experience of Jerusalem. However, instead of visiting the ancient city, they sought to experience the New Jerusalem where the Reign of God is finally fully realized. Unlike those who get lost in the corn maze, their goal is not merely to escape the confines of their situation, but rather to find the glory of God in the midst of their oh-so-humdrum reality. But then, isn't that what we seek every time we participate fully in the Divine Liturgy? After all, our Byzantine theology is all about realized eschatology. OMG, what's that?!? In short, it means that we don't have to wait for "Kingdom come" to experience the glory of God: the Lord is already powerfully present to those with eyes of faith, and the Divine Presence, like the tabernacle, is never locked from God's side of the door. "We who mystically represent the cherubim ... now lay aside all the cares of this life." (Where have I heard those words before?)

After Angers, I went to Brittany for a party: the American cousin was there to celebrate, with a family he has known since that first trip to France so long ago, the 90th birthday of their matriarch. Happy Birthday, Maman Odette! As grace would have it, the party took place on what would have been my own sainted mother's 101st birthday; I don't have to wish Maman Mary a happy birthday since I have no doubt that she is and ever will be ...

All of this, of course, reminds me of my own aging process. Sometimes I recall something that happened during my foolish youth – which in many ways was no less foolish than the adulthood that I'm currently inflicting upon God's people within Christ's Church, but that is grist for another mill. One of those things is a song by Joni Mitchell, The Circle Game:

And the seasons they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time

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We can't return we can only look
Behind from where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game.

Life is indeed, in many ways, like that proverbial merry-go-round with its ups and downs, but do we really need to see ourselves as captives? Methinks not. Did St. Augustine not tell us to love and then do whatever we wanted? After all, God is Love, and whatever is done out of genuine love for all concerned – i.e., for God, for those around us, without forgetting ourselves in the process - must therefore be of God. Whenever people ask me if it's OK to do something, I often remind them that they have the freedom of the children of God. No captivity, that.

Unfortunately, it often occurs that preachers condemn sin and sinner alike without realizing that everybody needs also to be reminded of salvation – including the sinful preacher. When, as the song tells us, we look back from where we came, we often find sin and brokenness. Some deny these wounds, while others choose to beat themselves because of their imperfections; my training and experience have taught me that these are not helpful strategies. Perhaps we, like the man beaten up by robbers, need to let ourselves be cared for and nursed back to health by whatever Good Samaritan the Divine physician sends into our lives. Isn't that, after all, what Church is all about – namely, to serve as a pool of wounded healers willing to help one another along the way? Only if we take advantage of this grace will we be able to pick ourselves up and move together confidently into the future, for that is where our loving Father waits for us, ready to welcome His prodigal sons and daughters into the peace and joy of His home – and ours.

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