

16th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2012

In preparing to walk the 500 mile pilgrimage to Santiago Spain, I have been walking with my 15-pound backpack . One of the most interesting routes is on Michigan Avenue from Oak Street to 32nd Street. The first mile on the journey is the Magnificent Mile, a walk filled with stores and tourists...a shopping "mecca." But further on down, past the "mag mile," things change: there are much fewer people, fewer stores and the surroundings much more ordinary. The seven-mile walk is a fascinating experience in seeing all the various cultures and colors of humanity and in getting a feel for the "pulse" of our culture.

This six- or seven-mile walk reminds me that we are all on a journey and we are all at different places along that journey. And we are searching to find answers to the problems we face and to figure out how to fill the voids that inevitably come our way. I carry a backpack with a burden...a 15-pound burden that surprisingly I fail to feel or sense. I do not feel burdened at all because the way the things are packed inside and the actual construction of the backpack lighten the burden.

Jesus leads the apostles on a journey in the boat across the waters...symbolic of an inner journey of the heart in which Jesus is about to change their perception of life, expanding their hearts to respond to the people in need. He takes them to find rest, not in a resort or spa, but in a deserted place. Another translation might be the "wilderness." Doesn't sound like much fun. This isn't about finding a vacation spot but finding a way to experience God as the One who satisfies all hungers and quenches all thirsts. In this "place" we find the rest that leads us to compassion...the whole point of the journey: Jesus was filled with mercy and compassion for the people because they had no shepherd, no one to guide them on the journey.

This gospel is not about the need for a vacation, although we all need one, but about encountering God on our own journey in such a way that he can "speak" to us and our hearts, like Moses and the people in the desert. God wants to share our burdens and when we allow him to do so, we find rest. In this experience, our hearts expand and we want to reach out to others...helping them to manage and carry their own burdens.

Compassion does spiritually what my backpack does physically: it rearranges the burdens and unloads what is not needed. Compassion is not taking away another person's burdens but helping them to see their burdens in a new light, reminding them that they do not walk or journey alone. We give to others what God has given to us.

A life of compassion is a life of rest, for in the act of compassion, we are refreshed and renewed; we come out of our self-centered overly preoccupied worlds, helping to share another's burdens and allowing them to share ours. In this beautiful exchange, we realize that we do not journey alone

In my journey from Oak Street to 32nd Street, I carry with me much more than a backpack; I carry the memories of people who need my prayers and memories of the people who are praying for me...and the burdens of life are eased.