

Prof. Stephanie Paulsell:

Choir. You take our breath away. Thank you. Would you pray with me?

Paulsell: Oh, send out your light and your truth. Let them lead us. Let them lead us to your Holy Hill and to your dwelling. Then we will go to your altar. Oh God, oh God, our exceeding joy. And we will praise you with the harp. Oh God, our God. Amen.

Paulsell: My first job in ministry was in a place like this and I was lucky in my mentor because I had very little experience when I started. The Dean of the University Chapel where I worked was an Episcopalian priest named Bernie Brown who allowed me to apprentice myself to him. I followed him in and out of dorm rooms and hospital rooms and soup kitchens and chaplains meetings, learning from a minister who wore his vocation like a second skin.

Paulsell: He trusted me with his pulpit and his congregation and little by little, I grew into my own vocation. On Sundays Bernie celebrated the Eucharist at an enormous wooden altar at the front of the church and I would assist him receiving the bread and wine from people who brought it up out of the congregation, handing him neatly pressed linen napkins to wipe the lip of the cup.

Paulsell: Afterwards, Bernie and I would carry the leftovers outside, pour the wine on the earth and spread out the bread for the birds. And after a few weeks when it seemed I had gotten the hang of things, Bernie asked me to take a turn at the altar as the celebrant.

Paulsell: Now, I loved what Bernie did at that altar on Sundays. I thought it was beautiful and mysterious, but I had grown up with a very different ritual of communion. In my church, the Lord's supper was more of a meal around a table than a sacrifice at an altar and good graduate student that I was, I wanted to give an intellectually honest account of myself. So I thanked Bernie for the invitation, but said, I don't know if I can lead this ritual because I don't really know what it means.

Paulsell: "Oh, Bernie said, "We don't do this because we know what it means. We do it in order to find out what it means."

Paulsell: Now, I learned a lot of things in graduate school, but this was one of the most important things I learned. That the things we do in places like this, study and pray and confess our failings and receive communion and pass the peace, we can do them in order to find out what they mean. We don't have to wait until we have everything figured out before we join one another around the communion table or in prayer or in service. Bernie taught me that it is possible to act our way, pray our way, sing our way into new ways of thinking, and he taught me that some things can't be understood until we practice them. Turning them in the light of our own experience and the life of our body.

Paulsell: Open your arms at the altar, Bernie taught me, and your heart might open. Open your arms and your heart and you might change. Now, there are many practices to do in order to find out what they mean here at the Memorial church. But one we are

particularly excited about exploring this year is the practice of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is part of our human inheritance that we receive from religious traditions born of the desire that our lives have meaning. The world is dense with sacred places and criss-crossed in every direction by well-worn pilgrimage paths.

Paulsell: Millions of people travel each year to Medina and Mecca, to Rome, to the river Ganges, to Jerusalem. Thousands make the circuit around the Japanese Island of Shikoku to visit the 88 Buddhist monasteries there and thousands more make their way along the network of pilgrimage routes of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. The small country of the Netherlands alone contains more than 800 pilgrimage sites and that doesn't begin to count each person's own pilgrimage paths, the ones that lead to the homes where we grew up or the place where we first told someone we loved them, or the place where someone we love is buried. Nor does it count the pilgrimages we have made through the portable sacred space of books or through our own interior landscape. There is hardly anywhere we can go that isn't someone's sacred space.

Paulsell: Now, one of the reasons pilgrimage is a powerful practice is because what will happen on a pilgrimage is unpredictable. When I was a child, a close friend of my family, a Trappist monk named Matthew Kelty, made a pilgrimage from his monastery in North Carolina to Washington D.C. to protest the Vietnam war. He walked up route 15 with the monastery dog, paused each day to say mass in a church or in the woods, tried to make each step a prayer.

Paulsell: A few days into the pilgrimage, he and his dog were attacked by a larger dog and Matthew kicked that dog until it left them alone. Now, you cannot kick a dog on a pilgrimage and then just go about your business. The contradiction between being a monk walking for peace and a monk kicking a dog became part of Matthew's pilgrimage. Part of his meditation and his prayer. A reminder that the violence in us needs little encouragement to come to the surface.

Paulsell: "But if there are monsters in our depths and there are." Matthew wrote later, "There is also the presence of God and when we touch that we set free the power of love."

Paulsell: A pilgrimage can also help us respond to the violence in ourselves and also in our history. To help us think about our pilgrimage theme, the Memorial Church staff made a pilgrimage together this summer led by our colleague Reverend Dan Smith of First Church in Cambridge. First Church was founded in 1631 and Dan has been researching past church members who were enslaved in this area in the 17th and 18th centuries in the hopes of honoring them with the Memorial and developing some forms of reparation.

Paulsell: Dan walked with us around Harvard Square, introducing us to a history that is almost completely hidden. What difference did it make to call that walk around our neighborhood a pilgrimage? It meant there was room for mourning, room for penitents, room for reverence, room for prayer. It meant that we were not just learning a history we hadn't known. It meant that we felt it's claim on us. It's call for a response from us. Because it was a pilgrimage, we know we are meant to be changed.

- Paulsell: Now the anthropologists have taught us that pilgrimage is a liminal space alive with the possibility of transformation. Because on pilgrimage we are separated from the familiar ways that life is structured at home and we can see that there might be other ways to live. On the road, we encounter each other differently than we do at home and so new relationships become possible and with them new visions of community.
- Paulsell: No wonder the pilgrimage Psalm that Geramal read for us this morning is so full of singing. My heart and my flesh sing for you, the Psalmist says. The pilgrims get stronger and stronger as they draw near to God's mountain. The landscape itself changes from desert to a place of springs as their feet pass over it. Even if the Pilgrim whose voice we hear in that psalm doesn't get all the way into the courts of the Lord, it will be enough to make it to the threshold. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness, the Psalmist sings.
- Paulsell: Psalm 84 also reminds us that not all pilgrimages take shape across an exterior landscape. The pilgrims in the Psalm have the highways to Zion in their hearts. Their pilgrimage could follow those interior roads. The great Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila mapped out a pilgrimage to what she called the interior castle where God dwells in each of us and told the nuns in her care, "You can take that journey whenever you want and you don't have to ask anyone's permission."
- Paulsell: In the story from the gospel of Luke that Sonja read for us this morning, Jesus invite Simon Peter on a kind of pilgrimage that takes him inward and outward at once. We find Jesus in this passage in Peter's boat teaching the people who had crowded onto the shore to hear him. Peter has been out all night fishing on the sea of Galilee and I imagine him exhausted, listening and maybe even dozing as the boat rocked a little way off from shore and I imagine his dismay when Jesus turned to him and said, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets."
- Paulsell: We can hear the at what an effort it would cost Peter to do this. In his reply, "We've worked all night long." Peter replies, "And we haven't caught anything." But Peter does steer his boat away from the shore and into the deep water. He lifts those heavy nets with Jesus's help, I like to think, and heaves them over the side and the nets fill up with so many fish so fast that the nets begin to strain and break.
- Paulsell: Peter calls out to James and John in their boat and together they haul up those nets until the decks of both boats are covered in fish flashing in the sunlight. So many fish that the boat starts to sink. By the time they get their damaged boats back to shore, all the fishermen on board had decided to follow Jesus, leaving everything else behind.
- Paulsell: These fishermen find something they are looking for in Jesus, but he seems to find something he is looking for in them too. We so often find Jesus in the gospels going out with fishermen on their boats or sitting and talking with them on the shore as they wash and mend their nets. Maybe it was the shared work he loved or being on the water or feeling the sun on his skin, but maybe Jesus was drawn to fishermen because their business is with what lives below the surface in the deep water.

Paulsell: Every day they shoved their nets over the side, hoping the fish will be there. I think Jesus could see their work was a daily pilgrimage that took them into the water, but also into themselves. A daily act of faith. Maybe he recognized his vocation and theirs. There's so much that conspires to keep us drifting across the surface of our lives.

Paulsell: The busy-ness that keeps us racing from obligation to obligation, making it hard to remember the questions and hopes that set us on our path in the first place. Distractions erode our capacity to go deeper. Our fear about the future, our own and the worlds can be so paralyzing that it keeps us from joining others to work for a different future. The ministry of this church is to help us steer our boats further out into the deep water and to give us a hand as we lower our nets and hope that the fish are there.

Paulsell: The philosopher Simone Weil writes about experimental certainties. Things we can't know unless we practice knowing them. Things we can't believe unless we act as if they're true. Things we can't understand and so we find out what they mean through practicing them with others. This church is a place to practice, to practice having faith, faith in God, but also faith in one another. Faith in ourselves. It is a place to pray as if someone were listening. To make a pilgrimage as if we might be led somewhere significant. To join others in service as the world might be transformed. It is a place to practice living as the Benedictines like to say, *Conversatio Morum*, a continual conversion of life, a permanent openness to change.

Paulsell: Once Peter had hauled his nets filled with fish under the deck of his boat, he fell to his knees before Jesus confessing, "I am a sinful man." But Jesus tells him not to be afraid and why should he be afraid? Peter hasn't done anything wrong. He might not have believed that those nets would come up filled with fish, but after fishing all night long without a single catch, why would he?

Paulsell: What matters is that he lowered his nets anyway and because he did, he was present to a miracle he would never have witnessed if he had had to rely on belief alone. Whether you are here for the beautiful music or the student oasis, whether you are here because there is a question keeping you awake at night or because the bells woke you up this morning and you thought you might as well come over, I hope you hear in this story something of the invitation this church makes to you and to me and to all of us to put out into the deep water of community, the deep water of our life with God, the deep water of the life of the world God created and made good. There are sacred paths everywhere around us and within us. Come. Let us set out in the light of the Lord.