

According to Father John, **“A pilgrimage is the act of deliberate travel; traveling outside while traveling within. It is a chance to reconnect with the earth, to listen, to face your inner self, to actively commune with a greater power.”** He was quoting Brandon Wilson, a man who had gone on many pilgrimages around the world. But from the very beginning, it was very clear that none of us wanted to go on this trip. To be honest, in the beginning of the week everyone couldn’t wait to go home and the days went by slowly. One of us wrote: “I wanted nothing to do with this trip and although there were some people I wish weren’t here, all of us (with our personalities), made this trip unique”. Another one wrote: “When we first arrived here I was reluctant because the place was different. [Since it was a new place] it took me out of my comfort zone.”

Though reluctantly, we all embarked on this journey to search for our inner selves and a direction for our lives as adults. Like the lawyer in today’s gospel, we went searching for the truth about the kingdom of God, and along the way, we discovered many characteristics of our selves in very surprising ways.

The question that the lawyer in today’s gospel asked was:-- - “who is my neighbor?” I believe this is a very important question, because we left Point Pleasant Beach as individual members of the J2A class, but we came back a community of neighbors; showing much care and concern for one another.

This week I learned that in order to be completely content with my life I must look inward and trust that God will guide me throughout life’s numerous twists and turns.

I feel like everything turned around in the middle of the week when we went to worship and have dinner with a group of Quakers. We worshipped in their home which involved 30 minutes of silence. It may sound impossible for twelve teenagers to sit quietly for that long, but we all really benefited from it. One of us wrote: “The most powerful experience [for me] was with the Quakers because I felt God was talking to me and gave me the meaning [to] my life”. Another one wrote: “I felt God’s presence the most at the Quaker meeting. Silence in my opinion, is the only true way to connect with God. While at the meeting I kept hearing one phrase repeated over and over in my mind. “In order to live, a person must learn from their mistakes.” And again, another person wrote: ‘From the Wednesday night at the Quakers’ house, I learned that God doesn’t always speak through a voice. Sometimes silence and meditation is the best way to find God. Like the one Quaker said, “God does not interrupt; he waits for you to listen to him”.

This week, we learned [about] God’s creation. Every morning and every night we prayed [the daily offices of Morning Prayer and Compline].

Another thing we learned from this trip was hospitality. [Marge and Ronnie, (Ms. Jorgensen’s)] Friends, [as well as] the Quakers, opened their homes to us and we enjoyed nice dinners [as well as fellowship] along with some prayers.

The day after our arrival, we went to mass at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, a historic church in Edgartown, where we met this cool old guy smoking a pipe at the entrance of the church; he turned out to be our preacher and celebrant. [In his sermon], he talked a lot about pilgrimage, [faith, and doubt], and how to explore and find God in our [lives].

Later on, Ms. Jorgensen [also] told us about God’s unconditional love, and it made me realize that all the wrongs that we have done don’t matter to God; he still loves us. [I learned from the Genesis story that] when God made us; it was “really” good. He made us in his image, [and] that made us better than [other creatures]. The week was filled with meeting new people and experiencing different things. During the many nature walks I observed everything; the living plants and animals as well as the dead plants. Most of the nature walks were done in silence and you could feel the presence of God in the wild. [At] the Aquinnah Cliffs [which is a Native American Sacred site]; I learned about the beauty of nature. I also learned that God can show us he cares with the littlest things. I saw a flower that was among all dead plants. It was the only healthy living thing in the patch.

We also went hiking, and followed the wrong trail. If we hadn’t done so, we would not have seen a beautiful beach, [and a] beautiful bog. Like the story in our Gospel reading, if the Good Samaritan had not taken the turn he took, he would not have found the dying man and saved him. Life, indeed, is full of surprises, and we all had our share of that this week.

Father John told us to take risks and that is exactly what we did. [Whether] taking a risk by walking through a poison Ivy patch to explore the nature trails or jumping off the State Beach bridge in Oak Bluffs, it was a risk, and we would not learn or grow without taking risks. Even bridge jumping made people realize their true potential. It made people really have to get the guts to do it and some people conquered their fear of heights. Even when we went kayaking every person had to push themselves paddling against the current which was rough. When we went to the Aquinnah cliffs we had to [be silent]. No one thought we were going to be able to do it but we [did]. Observing the beautiful scenery in silence really helped us think of our purpose [in life]. I think this trip over all was meant for us to discover our meaning in life and do it in a way that we would not have done back here in New Jersey. We learned a lot about the people in our class. We learned who the messy ones were and who the neat ones were by the way they kept our room. We also learned about each other’s limits and everyone’s personality.

Here are the words some of us used to sum up our experiences of our pilgrimage:

“This week made me realize that God has a plan for me. Although I don’t know what yet, I know that God will love me no matter what.”

“This trip has made me have a better outlook on life.”

“This past week changed the way I connect with God. We went to a beach to watch the sunset; that’s another once in a life time moment. The lesson that came out of this [for me] was not to rush the moment [but take time] and enjoy life. This trip changed my life. I felt that I can make decisions and be responsible for my own actions, and I also [discovered] new approaches toward God.”

“During the course of this week, I learned [many of] my ideas about God, my fears, and what kind of person I want to be. I also learned that to be an adult you have to be responsible for yourself and your actions.”

“This week made me change my outlook [on] life.”

“Basically this week, I learned a little more about who I want to be as an adult. I want to be a caring, loyal, responsible person who can conquer their fears. It is not what others think about you, but how you [present] yourself to others. God works in strange ways, but everything will be okay in the end. He never gives us what we can’t handle. He always comes through in the end”.

The hero in today’s Gospel reading is called a Good Samaritan because he showed us how to care for others in need. Jesus used his action as an example to teach others how to be neighbors. A neighbor is one who is caring, loyal, and responsible; even to a stranger.

Even though we all resisted going away for a whole week to pray, we learned that by taking care of one another, we became a community. St. Mary’s has taught us a valuable lesson which will guide us for the rest of our lives.

We want to thank everyone whose generosity of time and money made it possible for us to learn these valuable lessons and to grow in our faith. Above all, we want to thank all of you for believing in us; especially, our parents. We will do our best to not disappoint you.

Thank you.

Nick, Grace, Craig, Kevin, Chauncey, Dakota, Joshua, Taylor, Thomas, Patrick, Zack, and Brad.