

FAITHFUL WORDS MEDITATION: ON PILGRIMAGE

Pilgrimage toward Justice

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In Australia, the aboriginal tradition of the “walkabout” beckons people to drop what they are doing and to go on a pilgrimage, following the footsteps of their ancestors. Navigating land they have not crossed before, as “walkabout” pilgrims they depend on something called songlines left behind by their very first ancestors said to have traveled in mythic time. As the story goes, these ancestors scattered a trail of music and words with their footprints, naming creation as they went and bringing it into being as they spoke and sang and walked.

Today, I remember a man I never met but knew from the trails he left behind, paths he and others opened up as civil rights activists in Milwaukee. Fr. James Groppi died on November 4, 24 years ago. In the late 1960s, with many others from the NAACP, James Groppi helped organize and lead 200 consecutive nights of marching for open housing in the city of Milwaukee. He was a white Catholic priest who became a much-maligned target of those resisting integration. But if we could retrace the footsteps of those 200 marches throughout the city, we might hear their songlines ringing out even now – the notes of freedom in the making, the hard rhythms of feet marking a new way, the sound of voices joined in a common aspiration and the shared act of creating equality and justice anew.

On August 28, 1967, James Groppi and over 100 others marched three miles across the city’s Menomonee River Valley on an extended viaduct then known locally as the “longest bridge in the world.” Said to stretch all the way from Africa to Poland, the bridge connected Milwaukee’s predominately black north side, where James Groppi’s church was located, and the city’s nearly all-white and predominately Polish American south side.

On that August night, the marchers’ handwritten signs crossing the world’s longest bridge read simply “We Need Fair Housing.”

At the south end of the bridge, the marchers were met by a crowd of 8,000 counter-demonstrators, jeering, taunting and cursing the marchers from the north, who then

said a brief prayer, turned and walked back across the bridge without incident. The next night, the marchers returned and were met by an even larger crowd of 13,000, now hurling rocks and bottles with their angry and violent words. Later that night, when the marchers walked back to the Freedom House, their northside headquarters, they found it in flames, burning to the ground.

Still they were not deterred. For the next 198 nights, the fair housing marches continued in Milwaukee. James Groppi was arrested nine times, each time, returning to the streets to march again.

The marchers did not know when or even if change would come. There was no guarantee they would succeed. In fact, most evidence suggested otherwise. Only now, 40-some years later, can we see the distance that they traveled; the much needed path they opened; the justice they walked and sang into being. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in April, 1968; Milwaukee passed its own stronger fair housing law just weeks later. And that viaduct in Milwaukee is not called “the longest bridge in the world” anymore. It has been officially renamed the “James Groppi Unity Bridge,” making it, I believe, a songline of its own kind.

Still, we’re not done marching by a long shot. We have come a long way but not nearly far enough. We have just begun this pilgrims’ way.

But as we pick up our walking sticks again, remember, we are never alone. Our feet walk paths made by others before us both recently and long ago. And while the path may be difficult, it is also old and worn. It is a known route taking us as it does to an unknown destination, but with each step, with each night’s marching and every marcher moving, we are getting closer.

Do you hear the songlines singing? Can you feel the ancestors’ footprints beneath your own feet? Come; join the long march, this pilgrimage of old. We are singing justice into being with our words and with our feet. We need your voice; we need your feet. Now is not the time to rest. Come be a pilgrim on this road.

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