

Walking the Camino de Santiago was an experience unlike any other pilgrimage I have done. Even after reading the testimonies of those who have walked it before me and hearing of their multiple layers of struggle, I did not (and could not have) fully anticipate the degree to which the Camino is designed to wear you down, so that you have no choice, but to slow down. As a competitive, type A, New Yorker, slowing down is not an organic option in my life, as my DNA and culture drive me to “push through,” “get it done,” and do my best to ignore the distractions along the way. On the Way of St. James, however, his faithful Rabbi had a few different lessons to teach me about slowing down.

Lesson 1: Resist the Offense of Unmet Expectations!

From our very first zoom meeting to begin preparing together for the Camino, we were told that we could expect the walks to stretch us, but the hotels to pamper us. After long days on our feet, we could look forward to three and four star hotels, with good food and great wine every night. As one who already struggles to sleep very much at night, the thought of a comfy bed and nice room each night was a welcomed blessing. And as one who loves to eat good food and drink good wine, I was very happy that we would be well provided for in those areas as well. Unfortunately, however, our actual experience did not pan out so well. Instead of three and four stars, our hotels were one and two stars, with small twin beds, mildewy bathrooms, sticky floors, and mothball odors. Instead of delicious food and good wine, we were given slimy ham and various breads for breakfast and several days in a row of low-grade pork or sardines for dinner. It would have been

much easier to simply roll with these disappointments if we did not come in expecting far better accommodations. This was then compounded by the fact that the amount of kilometers that our tour guide would communicate we had to travel each day, was always underestimated. He would communicate the distance from one hotel to the next as the crow flies, but not as the Camino winds. Thus, we would regularly walk two, three, and one day even eight additional kilometers, only to reach another disappointing hotel with another disappointing dinner. The temptation from the very beginning of our journey, was to get stuck in the offense of unmet expectations. It would have been very easy to begin to grumble in my heart and then to allow each new unmet expectation to multiply my offense and growing disdain. And while my heart was honestly struggling to not fall into that trap, had I done so, I would have missed what God was doing in allowing that churning in my heart. For the unmet expectations were not the ends, but the means to God's end of digging up deeper pain that daily life in New York could have easily missed or glossed over.

Lesson 2: Interruptions Are On Purpose

On Day Three, as my heart was falling into grumbling over my unmet expectations and growing body pains, God sent an interruption. We were walking in the pouring rain, up and down steep hills, and I was sharing with my walking partners why I did not think I would ever walk the Camino again and how I was not even sure why God brought me on this one, when we came upon another pilgrim named Kathy. She was walking by herself, and as we came up from behind her and passed her, she had the audacity to interrupt my little rant and ask me, "so why *do* you think God has you on this trip?" Her willingness to

clearly communicate that she had been listening in our conversation and her boldness to interject her question into it, stopped me in my tracks. As I began to try to answer her question, I realized that I really did not know why God had me on the Camino, but that complaining about my circumstances was certainly not how I was going to find out. I saw the trap of grumbling for what it was in that very moment, and quietly repented to the Lord for so doing (and later repented to my walking buddies as well). God sent Kathy to interrupt my rant, so that He could recenter my heart through her question, and also so He could give us some new friends! For just a few hundred yards ahead were Kathy's husband, Matt, and their daughter, Julie, who just so happened to be staying at nearly all the same hotels with us from that point forward. God is good like that!

Lesson 3: Choose to Surrender Unrealized Hopes!

On the second to last day of walking, God revealed to me His purpose in allowing the fire of unmet expectations, and He did so through another interruption. As a church community, we have been mourning the loss of one of our elders, George, who was like a father to me. His was the name written on my rock throughout this journey. After another long day of walking, I was in my room with my wife, when I received a text from George's daughter with a picture of George that showed up in her photo memories. I was absolutely not expecting to see that picture, and it broke me. I immediately started to cry, but the crying quickly transitioned into anger. I trembled and wept, and actually punched the pillow on the bed and yelled, as the anger that had been pushed down in me erupted. In that moment, God revealed to me that my anger was rooted in a deep sadness over both what had been lost in my relationship with George, and in what I never actually had

with my biological father. The Lord asked me if I was willing to lay down that pain and anger or if I was going to insist on continuing to carry it as my familiar “safe” space for my heart. When I told Him I was ready to lay it down, He instructed me to find a bigger rock to represent that pain and the anger coming out of it, and to carry it until He showed me where to lay it down. I carried that rock nearly the entire next day, until He showed me the spot where I was to stop the cycle of pain and anger, and yield to His better invitation. When I laid down that rock, I felt His love and pleasure pour over me, and heard Him say, “Come to me, all who are weak and heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). I wept in His presence and then walked without my burden from that point forward. When I arrived in Santiago, I heard God laugh as He revealed to me the fact that I had carried George with me the entire Camino, and that I could carry him the rest of my way as well. Praise the Lord!

I am deeply grateful for the experience of walking the Camino, for the freedom, healing and intimacy that has been fostered with God in so doing, and for the new friendships forged along the way. May the good work done in Spain change the way I live in New York from this day forward!