

John 10:22-30; Psalm 23 4-25-2010

Flying from here to there and back again is not what it used to be. And, yet, I love to fly in spite of its many inconveniences. I even like some turbulence from time to time. With every bump and stomach tossing drop, I relax more and more and, I know this sounds a little bit weird, I become one with the plane. Some term this “a sort of Zen thing.”

When I travel I always seem to have seatmates. I have come to sense when someone wants to talk and when someone doesn't, the earplugs are usually a dead give away. I even know when I am open to conversation and when I am not. When I need to be silent I stick my nose in a book and do not emerge.

I remember three seatmates from the past several years of travel. For some reason they stand out. I think it is because they impressed me in one way or another.

The first was a young woman on a flight from Providence, Rhode Island to Milwaukee. This happened years ago but I still remember her. She was in the middle seat and terribly nervous. She informed me, and the poor man on the other side of her, that she always got sick when she flew and that we needed to be prepared. She asked me what I did for a living and, instead of being wise and telling her I was a novelist or a ballerina or something, I told her I was a pastor. We were off and running. She knew nothing of her faith although she had been baptized and confirmed in it. She was not even aware that there was an Old and New Testament in the Bible and not sure where or when it was Jesus had appeared. Bible Study 101 was in session for the three plus hours of the flight. One benefit in all of this was that she did not get sick—not even a little.

The second person I remember, who engaged me in a religious discussion, was a Jesuit priest/teacher from Marquette University. I was seated beside him on a flight from Phoenix to Milwaukee. This was a long flight in many ways. He thought he needed to instruct me on the errors in my theological thinking. I am sure you can imagine how well this set with me. He was a very, very bright man and I understand where Jesuits are coming from. I have a second cousin who is a Jesuit. Telling my seatmate this earned me one point, although my theological stance did not.

Then there was yesterday's seatmate on a trip from Detroit to Hartford. It was a trip fraught with difficulties but the conversation I had with Chris made all the stress and strain worth it. Our discussion was one of equals. We connected on some level and listened to each other as we explained where we were on our spiritual journeys. It was the kind of conversation I like to have with my close friends and colleagues. He told me all about his religious background and the way he had renounced his Catholic faith when he was 13 and lost respect for his parish priest. This wasn't the first time he had challenged one of his teachers. In first grade he kept asking one of the nuns at his school many questions until she told him to “shut up.” No questions were to be asked. This began to open the door for him to make his break into a broader world of thought when he was older. Our conversation was wide-ranging and the length of the flight was not nearly enough.

As I thought about these three people, I realized that they all are sheep in the flock and that they represent most of us. Some of us are just beginning to learn the basics,

others have studied a long time and have solidified their faith systems, while others still have the desire to question and search more and more, looking for answers.

When Jesus was questioned as to whether he was the Messiah, he responded by telling those who inquired that they could not fully understand who he was or what he was about unless they were among his followers. We might guess that some who needed and wanted an answer began to listen more intently to him and might have even chosen to follow him.

He also told them that he and “the Father are one.” All he said and did was to point beyond himself to God, to help people understand God’s nature and God’s will for them.

When we ponder our scriptures, whether we are just beginning our search or whether we are farther along the road and dare to teach others, we discover more and more the ways of God. We learn the way we are to live and move and have our being to become the most successful humans we can become. We discover the true abundance of life and we live what we learn. We begin to live lives of hope, love, forgiveness and joy.

I learned much from my three seatmates. They helped me realize that there is far more for me to study and learn until I become what it is God wants me to be. This is part of the message that Jesus brought us. The road to understanding might be a long and winding one, but it is one we have been called to travel, as we seek to discover the best in ourselves and in others. Amen