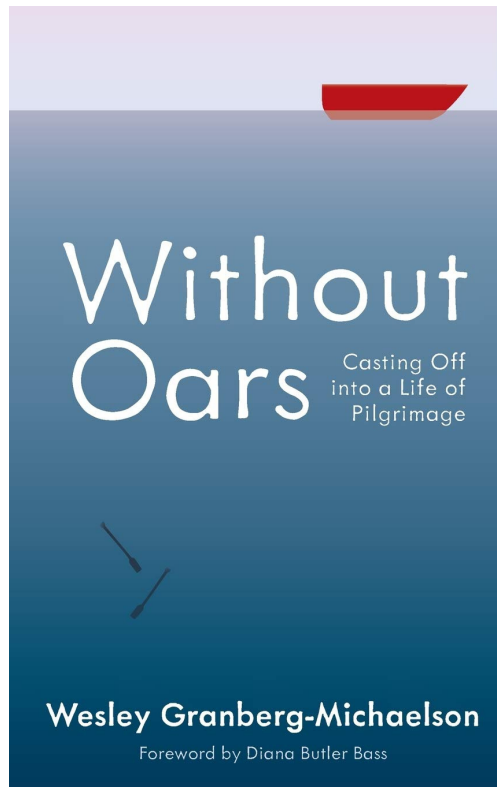


AUGUST STAFF PICK

WITHOUT OARS: CASTING OFF INTO A LIFE OF PILGRIMAGE

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson



I have a fascination with pilgrimages. They sound a bit scary and at the same time so sacred and holy. From what I know and have read, pilgrimages involve letting go and being open to the unexpected. Both of these concepts are hard for some of us who are strategic and die-hard planners. And all good boaters know you never get in a boat until you have stored the paddles/oars which makes “without oars” unthinkable.

So why did I pick up a book entitled “Without Oars: Casting Off into a Life of Pilgrimage”? One reason was the author. The Nebraska Synod was privileged to have Wesley Granberg-Michaelson as a keynote speaker at 2019 TheoCon and his message stuck. Second reason was the fact I understand drifting is a faith formation principle I need to learn more about as a growing disciple.

Granberg-Michaelson invites readers to spiritual discernment starting with “shedding”. Shedding is “leaving behind all our preconceived ideas, arguments, agendas and biases, holding them in suspense, while asking only one question, ‘Am I indifferent to everything but God’s will?’” (page 13) Instead of piling on more, shedding invites us to let go. It leads to an appreciation of the present, an openness to the unknown, and an opportunity to establish a new direction and habits. Granberg-Michaelson shares stories of his own walks, his pilgrimages at Mount Tabieorar, Camino de Santiago, and Jerusalem. He brings in Bible stories to help us see how God has throughout history used on the road time for learning.

Church leaders have advocated for change for decades and most of us would agree on that fact. But moving out of one’s comfort zone, leaning into the unknown, and giving up the idea that we must have solid, detailed, accountable plans is a leap of faith that edges on impossible. Granberg-Michaelson invites us to re-imagine leadership, put energy into developing spiritual depth, practice discernment, and rethink the amount of energy we

invest in strategic planning.

“On pilgrim pathways, we learn the myth of control, the wisdom of relinquishment, the promise of the unpredictable and the embodiment of grace.” (page 112) We are all on a pilgrimage of some sort. The pandemic brought front and center the need to acknowledge and name changes in the economy, relationships, daily activities, priorities, and values. The church is not change-exempt. God invites us to journey as a community of believers grounded in a gospel story that is never out of date.

Granberg-Michaelson’s book is a great read for the church council charged with visioning, a youth group planning an accompaniment trip, small groups acknowledging the importance of transitions and congregations open to seeing thresholds as opportunities God is at work. It is time to cast off without oars living into call and vocation as the beloved children of God.