Imagining the Parish in Late Medieval England

Rentz, Ellen K.

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Walking was one of the most defining features of parochial worship. Processions were a regular occurrence in the ritual life of the parish, an important expression not only of the layperson’s step-by-step progression toward God but of the broader parochial ideal of walking together in charity. Processional movement was part of a much broader tradition of associating spiritual development—in particular, the cultivation of charity and the avoidance of sin—with walking and climbing. Augustine, for example, described love as the foot of the soul, and in Middle English sermons, devotional handbooks, and catechetical guides, walking and climbing measure a person’s progress toward salvation. Whether by climbing a ladder of charity or by healing their rotten limbs through confession, laypeople were taught to correct and regulate their spiritual gait in this life. As I argue in this chapter, pedestrian movement was an important emblem of the layperson’s lifelong pursuit of salvation.

Although it was conventional to think of earthly life as a pilgrimage, a kind of temporary stopover on the way to eternal life with God, the motif of spiritually efficacious walking engages a
different set of aims. Pilgrimage—whether actual or imaginary, regional or international—prioritizes the traveler’s final destination and figures the journey itself as the means to that more important end. Instead of prioritizing only the final goal, the motif of walking prizes the means to it. That is, the motif assigns special value to the layperson’s efforts in this life to avoid sin and live charitably, efforts that are inherently difficult and which ultimately register as productive, hard-earned steps on the long road to salvation. In finding value in the mundane, “step-by-step” process of achieving salvation, the motif also recognizes the distinctly parochial nature of getting saved. Unlike pilgrimage, with its emphasis on a traveler’s final destination, the metaphor of walking focuses attention on the layperson’s work in the here and now and suggests that climbing one’s way to heaven is a local endeavor, rooted in and facilitated by the collective ritual life of the parish.

“Alle maner of peple be a-bowte to-geder”: Parochial Procession and Passage

The liturgical year was studded with processions. A regular feature of the Sunday Mass, processions in more elaborate forms marked special days and seasons throughout the year, particularly Eastertide, Corpus Christi, and Candlemas. They were also part of the celebration of saints’ feasts and church dedications, and the annual observance of Rogationtide involved a perambulation of the boundaries of the parish on three consecutive days.

1. On the traditional association of earthly life with pilgrimage, see especially Wenzel, “Pilgrimage of Life as a Late Medieval Genre,” 370–88.
2. Geary has suggested that pilgrims experienced pilgrimage as “a temporary hiatus in their normal lives.” Living With the Dead, 163. Dyas offers a useful introduction to late medieval English pilgrims and their practices in Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 128–44; see also the essays collected in Pilgrimage: The English Experience from Becket to Bunyan, particularly Morris’s “Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages” (141–63) and Duffy’s discussion of regional pilgrimage in “Dynamics of Pilgrimage in Late Medieval England” (164–77). Connolly explores the ways in which maps were designed to engage monastic viewers in active meditation, thereby enabling them to embark on spiritual or “imagined” pilgrimage in Maps of Matthew Paris, 28–39.
3. As Robert Banks observes in an essay on the metaphor of walking in biblical texts, the effort was construed as a “step-by-step affair, an ongoing, everyday process.” “Walking’ as a Metaphor,” 309–10.
4. Speculum Sacerdotale, 139 (lines 20–21).
The author of the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, a Middle English sermon collection from about 1400, conceives of the liturgical year as a series of collective commemorative processions. “Pere þe þat made þre processiouns,” the author writes in his sermon for Easter Sunday, “one that is made in the Purification of oure lady” and “another procession þat is made yche yere in the Sonday of Ramispalmarum.”6 Still other processions are made “yche Sonday,” he explains, summing up the liturgical year.7 The author’s inventory of processions certainly reflects, at least in part, the late medieval penchant for liturgical instruction. Indeed, given the fact that sermons were “surrounded by liturgical actions,” it is perhaps not surprising that sermon collections such as the *Speculum Sacerdotale* and Mirk’s *Festial* provide detailed instruction on processions, encouraging listeners to make connections between biblical events and their liturgical commemoration and to find spiritual meaning more generally in church rituals and practices.8 Middle English sermons offer crucial evidence about the meaning and function of liturgical practices, especially the processions that shaped the liturgical year.

The *Speculum*-sermonist’s conception of the liturgical year as a series of processions also acknowledges the important role that processional activity played in constructing the parish. He closes the sermon by observing that “the procession is made yche Sonday in representacion of that [which] the apostles made to oure lord in the day of his ascencion.” The original event “ne was not made in the Sonday,” he notes, but “it is now translatyd in-to the Sonday for þat þe procession mowe be solemnly doon when the peple are togedre.”9 This is a prime example of liturgical practice shaping the layperson’s understanding and conception of biblical events, as Duffy has argued.10 But it also emphasizes the collective dimension of processions and suggests, moreover, that laypeople themselves have shaped the liturgy: in celebrating the apostles’ Ascensiontide procession on Sundays, the contemporary practice prioritizes widespread participation on a day when the church is at its fullest. As a medium of worship, processions brought a parish together in what

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7. Ibid., 129 (line 1).
8. Poleg, “‘A Ladder Set Up on Earth’: The Bible in Medieval Sermons,” 207–8. Liturgical explication is common in Middle English sermon collections. See Powell’s discussion of John Mirk’s interest in helping his readers perform and, more importantly, understand liturgical rituals. Mirk, *Festial*, xxxviii. See also Weatherley’s introduction to *Speculum Sacerdotale*, xxiv, xxxiii.
Kathleen Ashley has called a “public statement” of their shared commitment to the church and to the pursuit of salvation.\textsuperscript{11}

Parish communities were, of course, not as neat and harmonious as their orderly processions made them out to be.\textsuperscript{12} Instead of concentrating on whether or not processions fostered an ethos of solidarity, however, I want to suggest that vernacular sermons emphasize the collective nature of processions in the service of shaping the processing parish as a kind of working group, actively engaged in the ongoing struggle against sin. Processional activity offers not just a reflection of the parish, harmonious or not, but a representation of its participants’ step-by-step movement toward salvation. The Palm Sunday procession, we might remember, chronicles the penitential progress of parishioners: those who had made an early confession were rewarded for their achievement with palms.\textsuperscript{13} The procession commemorates Christ’s own entry into Jerusalem, but as Mirk explains in his \textit{Festial}, it also celebrates the contemporary participants’ own resurrection from the “deth of evel leuyng [living] to þe lyue [life] of grace.”\textsuperscript{14} The palms signify not only that their individual carriers have “fowton wyth þe fende” but that the parish as a whole has triumphed, that “oure enemye” has been overcome.\textsuperscript{15} Rogation processions make an even more explicit demonstration of collective progress against sin and the devil. Performed on each of the three days preceding the Ascension, the procession required both clergy and congregants to trace the outer limits of the parish, a practice sometimes referred to as the “beating of the bounds.”\textsuperscript{16} Representations of dragons—either on banners or in the form of more complex, mechanized puppets—were a standard feature of the three-day procession. On the first two days, a dragon banner or straw-stuffed

\textsuperscript{11} Ashley, “The Moving Subjects of Processional Performance,” 15. On the Corpus Christi procession as an expression or embodiment of “social wholeness,” see James, “Ritual, Drama, and Social Body,” 9, 15–16. See also Sargent’s recent description of a late medieval image of a parochial Corpus Christi procession in which a congregation walks the perimeter of a churchyard. The parish imagined here is, as Sargent notes, a “microcosm of the world,” and its well-manicured churchyard, neatly enclosed by a wooden fence, reflects the unity of its idealized congregation as they process through it. Sargent, “Program of Illustration,” 258, 266 (plate 6).

\textsuperscript{12} Rubin in particular warns against placing too much emphasis on the capacity of processions to create neat and tidy communities or “body-town[s].” See “Small Groups,” 132–50, at 145. See also Beckwith, \textit{Signifying God}, 24–31.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Speculum Sacerdotale}, 98 (lines 16–17). For further discussion of Palm Sunday processions, see chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{14} Mirk, \textit{Festial}, 101 (lines 22–23).

\textsuperscript{15} “Iche criston man and womman schal þis day beron palmus in processioun, schewing þat he hath fowton wyth þe fende, and hath þe victorye of hym bi clene schryuing of mowþe.” Mirk, \textit{Festial}, 102 (lines 53–57).

\textsuperscript{16} Duffy, \textit{Stripping of the Altars}, 136.
dragon would occupy a place of prominence at the head of the procession, in front of the cross. On the third day, the defeated dragon—signified by removing the stuffing from its tail or carrying the banner backwards—would be relegated to the foot of the procession as a symbol of the participants’ shared victory over the devil.  

In emphasizing the success of the parish as a whole, sermonists underscore the importance of widespread participation in Rogation processions. “None schal excuson hym from þeise processiones þat may godely ben þer,” writes Mirk; “Holy Chyrch ordeyneth vche man to faste þese þree dayes and to gon in processyoun.” The author of the Speculum Sacerdotale explains that “worldly occupacionis” are to be left behind and that servants and bondmen should be excused from their work in order to attend the procession. “Alle maner of peple,” he instructs, should be “a-bowte to-geder.” Rogation processions played an important role in the formation and preservation of village and town identities, and as Steven Justice observes, they “made the community visible as a population—displayed the village to itself—while recalling and making visible the community as a locality, a place and a unit of production.” As a public statement of parochial identity, the act of processing during Rogationtide also defined a parish by its collective effort against the devil; that is, these processions not only produced a parish, they produced a parish actively engaged in the battle against sin. Taking place over the course of three days, the series of three processions underscores the incremental nature of this battle—only on day three is the dragon defeated. Nor is the victory complete. The Speculum-sermonist explains that the three-day format represents the devil’s long history as a troublemaker in three different ages: before Christ, during the life of Christ, and after Christ’s death. Unfortunately, the devil remains on the prowl, even now: he “deceyued the peple” in each of these ages, the sermonist warns, “and ȝit is abowte for to deceyue hem.” In celebrating parishioners’ triumph over sin and the

17. The Rogationtide sermon in the Speculum Sacerdotale describes a three-day procession in which a long-tailed dragon is carried before the cross for the first two days and behind the cross on the third (141 [lines 25–31]). For a Rogation procession involving both banners and a dragon, see the South English Legendary, 162 (lines 41–48). Mirk describes a procession with banners. Festial, 139 (lines 46–47). Vauchez discusses the Rogation procession and its history in Laity in the Middle Ages, 133–37. See also Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 136–39.


19. Speculum Sacerdotale, 139 (lines 18–21).


devil, the Rogation procession also acknowledges that the fight against sin is ongoing. Indeed, the *Speculum*-sermonist explains that participants come together at Rogationtide “to haue foryeuenes and grace riȝt as they alle to-gether hadde synned.”\(^{22}\) The procession ultimately celebrates their provisional defeat of the devil while gesturing to their shared status as penitents who must continue to work toward salvation.

On both Palm Sunday and during Rogation, the enactment of a procession symbolizes the spiritual triumph of a parish. In his sermon for Easter, Mirk draws special attention to processional movement—to “passyng,” or passage—as a medium of spiritual development, a means of moving from sin to virtue and from earthly life to salvation. Mirk explores the etymology of *pasche*, the Latin word for Easter, in order to link the holiday with pedestrian movement.\(^{23}\) In “englys tonge,” he writes, “Pashe Day” means “passying day,” a fitting description, to Mirk’s mind, because Easter “passes” all other days in terms of Christians’ eagerness to come together in forgiveness, having been healed with the “salve of charity.”\(^{24}\) Easter is also a passing day, Mirk explains, because the procession marks the very passage of its participants out of sin. As we know from Palm Sunday sermons, the Easter season itself celebrated Christians’ early fulfillment of the sacrament of penance, and on Easter Sunday, those who had fully confessed their sins were eligible to take communion. And yet, while Christians may have satisfied their penitential obligations, at least for the time being, Mirk’s Easter sermon emphasizes the ongoing nature of the fight against sin. Indeed, his explication of Easter enacts the very “passinge” that it celebrates. Instead of observing that his listeners have already passed from sin to virtue, he claims that they *should*. He then works his way through the seven deadly sins, one by one, pairing each with its opposing virtue:

\begin{quote}
Hit is also a passinge day, for vche criston man schulde passon owte of euel lyuing into gode lyuynge, owte of vices into vertues, owte of pryde into meknesse, owte of couetyse into largenesse (*generosity*), owte of sclowthe (*sloth*) into holynesse or bysines, owte of envye into loue and charite, owte of wrathe into mercy, owte of glotonrye into abstinens, owte of lecherye
\end{quote}

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 139 (lines 21–22).
\(^{23}\) Mirk’s discussion of *pasche* is heavily indebted to John Beleth’s *Summa de Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, a twelfth-century commentary on church ritual: see Powell’s discussion in her notes to Mirk’s *Festial*, 352, n. 40–54; Macy, “Commentaries on the Mass during the Early Scholastic Period,” 27–29. Mirk was not the only sermonist to take an interest in the etymology of *Pasche*; the author of the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, for example, explores its roots in the Greek and Hebrew words for “passing.” *Speculum Sacerdotale*, 117 (lines 25–32).
\(^{24}\) Mirk, *Festial*, 115 (lines 40–41, 45).
Mirk presents the passage from vice to virtue as a series of incremental steps—from pride to meekness, from covetousness to largesse, and so on—that culminate in future salvation. Those who have completed the passage will trade “fendus clokus” for “Godus barme” and, ultimately, God’s friendship. “Whoso passus þus,” Mirk explains, “is worthy for to cum to þat g rete feste þat God makyth þis day to alle þat þis passage makyth.” The ritual thus celebrates the participants’ achievement of having avoided sin, but it also recognizes the step-by-step nature of passing from evil to good.

Although Mirk never mentions footsteps per se, pedestrian movement looms over the sermon, in part because the Easter liturgy featured an elaborate procession on foot but also because Mirk repeatedly folds the Latin word for step—passus—into his discussion of Eastertide passing and passage. The collective passage that Mirk’s listeners undertake at Easter and throughout the liturgical year anticipates—perhaps even rehearses—their eventual passage to heaven. In observing that Christians achieve salvation by way of incremental passus, however, Mirk also activates a powerful trope used in sermon exempla, narrative poetry, and even visual imagery as a way of exploring the mechanics of getting saved.

— My Foot Is My Love

Mirk’s treatment of Eastertide passage is part of a long tradition of associating both charity and the avoidance of sin with pedestrian movement. The parochial ideal of charity (or caritas) had its roots in the Golden Rule, the injunction to love both God and neighbor. In the Lay Folks’ Catechism (1357), the Middle English translation of Archbishop Thoresby’s Latin Injunctions, charity is described as “a dere loue that us augh to haue / Unto god almighten and all our euen-cristen.” Above all, charity concerned doing...
what one should—one “augh to haue” love not only for God but for one’s fellow even-Cristen. As a spiritual imperative tied to the ideal of loving God and neighbor and to the principle of mutual help, charity permeated all aspects of lay social, civic, and spiritual life. The neighborly ideal went hand in hand with avoiding the socially destructive behavior associated with the Seven Deadly Sins, and Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, defines charity in part by explaining what it is not: neither envious nor proud, for example. It was commonplace in medieval sermons, handbooks, and visual sources to juxtapose each of the seven vices with each of the seven virtues, and as a general antidote to all sins, Charity was often considered the highest virtue. The Mass itself was studded with references to charity, from the plea for mutual forgiveness at the end of the Pater Noster to the priest’s request that parishioners receive the requisite “bond of peace and charity” in preparation for communion. Charity was also closely associated with the physical space of the church itself—the Dedication Rite, for example, includes a petition to God for help in providing the church and its parishioners with the “unbreakable bonds of charity.”

More than a means of avoiding sin, and more than what Thoresby described as a feeling that one ought to have toward others, charity was also

*Catechism,* 92–100. Fitzgibbons examines the translation and its more particular emphasis on lay learning in “Disruptive Simplicity: Gaytryge’s Translation of Archbishop Thoresby’s *Injunctions,*” 39–58.

29. For a recent discussion of the “religious character” of charity, see Brodman, *Charity and Religion in Medieval Europe,* 9–44, at 2. See also Buhrer, “From Caritas to Charity,” 113–28. The topic of mutual obligation has received much attention from social historians of the Early Modern period. See especially Brigden, “Religion and Social Obligation,” 68; Wrightson, “Mutualities and Obligations,” 157; Hindle, “A Sense of Place?” 108–28. The Mass itself was studded with references to charity, from the plea for mutual forgiveness at the end of the Pater Noster to the priest’s request that parishioners receive the requisite “bond of peace and charity” in preparation for communion. Charity was also closely associated with the physical space of the church itself—the Dedication Rite, for example, includes a petition to God for help in providing the church and its parishioners with the “unbreakable bonds of charity.”

30. 1 Cor. 13:4–7: “Love [caritas, charity] is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things,endures all things.”


33. Thiery examines charity in relation to the liturgy of church dedication in ibid., 41–45 (quotation appears at 45). See also the *Speculum Sacerdotale,* in which the dedication sermon describes the church as the “habitacion of God, concourse of angels, [and the] reconsiliacion of man,” a place within which “the lowenes of erþe” is “fellascipid to the hyenes of heuene” (165 [lines 34–36]).
a call to action. Late medieval Christians looking for a more practical guide to charitable living—not just what to avoid but what to pursue—found it in the Corporal Works of Mercy, the outward expressions of charity outlined in Matthew 25 and treated in late medieval catechetical works such as Mirk’s *Instructions for Parish Priests*. The seven Corporal Works were taught in sermons and during confession and comprised a set of obligatory charitable works that laypeople were expected to do on behalf of their “euen-cristen.” As a call to action, charity was often associated with motion and, more specifically, with walking, running, and climbing. The ambulatory theme is central to the biblical writings of Paul, who, on dozens of occasions, describes Christian life in peripatetic terms, urging his followers to “walk in love,” to walk worthily, and to walk in the Spirit and in Christ. Augustine forges a link between charity and movement in *De Doctrina Christiana*, where he describes *caritas* as “the motion of the soul towards the enjoyment of God.” Charity is not just the motion of the soul, however, but the motion of feet: in his *Commentaries on the Psalms*, Augustine likens love to a foot that, when headed in the right direction, is called charity. While pride is associated with falling,

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34. Matt. 25:34–36 prescribes the first six Corporal Works (feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, healing the sick, and visiting the prisoner), and the Book of Tobit (Tob. 1:16–17) provides the seventh (burying the dead). For further discussion, see Cullum, “Practice of the Spiritual and Bodily Works,” 177–79.


36. “Walk [περιπατεῖτε, *ambulate*] in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2). Here and in the following three quotations, I have modified the NRSV (which offers “live” rather than “walk”) to reflect Paul’s use of the verb περιπατεῖν (*peripatein*, to walk), rendered *ambulare* in the Vulgate, and translated in many English editions as “walk.” On Paul’s literal and figurative use of this verb and on “the wider linguistic field of words associated with walking” in Pauline texts, see Banks, “‘Walking’ as a Metaphor,” 303–13. See also Konsmo, *Pauline Metaphors*, 100–107; Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 198–99.

37. “Walk [περιπατῆσαι, *ambuletis*] worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1).

38. “Walk [περιπατεῖτε, *ambulate*] by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).

39. “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to walk [περιπατεῖτε, *ambulate*] in him” (Col. 2:6).

40. “Caritatem voco motum animi ad fruendum Deo propter ipsum et se atque proximo propter Deum.” Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 86 (3.10.16).

41. “Pes animae recte intelligitur amor: qui cum pravus est, vocatur cupiditas aut libido; cum autem rectus, dilectio vel charitas.” Augustinian, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 1–50, 202 (Ps. 9:15) [The foot of the soul is rightly understood to be love; which, when crooked, is called greed or lust; but when upright, love or charity]. For a discussion of the use of Augustine’s commentary on the psalms in medieval England, see Kuczynski, *Prophetic Song: The Psalms as Moral Discourse in Late Medieval England*, 21, 47–48.
LAY DEVOTION AND THE METAPHOR OF WALKING

charity walks, advances, and ascends. Perhaps not surprisingly, the ladder made a particularly appropriate motif for conceptualizing the upward trajectory of charity. In his early fourteenth-century poem on the Seven Sacraments (c. 1300–1350), William of Shoreham bemoans the fact that “heuene his heiȝe [high], and we beþ hevy.” He asks, “How scholde we þider [get there] þanne? Bi leddre.” This is a ladder made not of wood but of charity, its rungs consisting of “gode þeawis,” or good behaviors.

For Augustine, pedestrian movement offers a register of inner psychology and of the relationship between the will (affectus) and the intellect (intellectus), the twin powers—or feet—of the soul, and Peraldus later associated the pes affectus with the love that results from good works. As Freccero observes in his study of the stumbling pilgrim in Dante’s Inferno, a person’s gait offered an index of his or her spiritual decision making: choose love, and climb toward God; choose sin, and limp your way down to hell.

In medieval sermons, walking was a popular theme for exploring the relationship between charitable works in this life and salvation in the next. As we saw in Mirk’s Easter sermon, parochial processions symbolized—and occasioned discussion about—a congregation’s ongoing and incremental effort to pass from sin to virtue. But a sermon on the theme of walking could, in fact, be used on numerous occasions throughout the year. The late fourteenth-century sermons housed in the Royal 18 B. xiii collection—edited by Woodburn O. Ross under the title Middle English Sermons—includes a sermon for the third Sunday of Lent on the theme of ambulate in dilectione (walk in love)

42. “Ad abulandum et proficiendum et ascendendum caritas mouet; ad cadendum superba mouet” [Charity moves toward walking, progressing, and ascending: pride moves toward falling]. Augustine, Enarrationes in Psalmos 101–50, 62 (Ps. 120:5).


44. The cardinal virtues (faith, hope, charity) are often referred to as “þeawis.” MED, “theu,” n., 3b. Charity constitutes the third of three “heued [head] thewes” in the Lay Folks’ Catechism (8o, line 406), for example, but occupies a place of primacy in Cursor Mundi as the primary or “heuид [head] gode thewe of al” (1524 [line 27532]).

45. According to Wenzel, “affectus is, of course, not a matter of sentiment and ‘feeling’ but of will and love resulting in ‘good works.’” Peraldus makes this connection, Wenzel notes, “equating the image of pes intellectus with ‘good intention’ and of pes affectus with ‘work.’” Sin of Sloth, 65.

46. “The figure of a man in the act of walking was quite literally the incarnation of the act of choice, for walking was simply choosing brought down to the material plain.” Freccero, “Firm Foot on a Journey without a Guide,” 42. See also Gillespie’s discussion of the feet of the soul in English mystical writing. “Mystic’s Foot,” 199–230.
from Ephesians 5:2. Variant forms of the verb *ambulare* appear throughout the Bible, and in the upper and lower margins of the sermon’s opening folio, a helpful scribe provides a list of twelve additional Sundays for which this sermon might also be appropriate.48

The collection’s *Ambulate* sermon begins with a man named Ladas who ran so fast that he left no footprints behind. Ladas becomes an exemplar of perpetual motion directed toward God, as the sermonist urges his listeners to keep moving rather than standing still and allowing their feet to sink into the ground. “We muste nedis goye and not to stonde here in þis worlde,” he warns.49 “Goye we lyghtly,” he recommends, “not settynge oure fete of oure afeccion or loue to grettely þere-in.”50 For the *Ambulate*-sermonist, moving or “going” has to do with directing oneself away from the stagnation associated with sin and towards eternal salvation: “He þat goyþ here in þis world wurthelye, he shall com to þe liffe þat euermore is lastynge.”51 Those who go “wurthelye” are like pilgrims on the move, “euermore spedynge hem in here weyes.”52 Although we might expect the motif of the pilgrim to play a central role in a sermon on the theme of *Ambulate*, the sermonist is more interested in movement itself than in travel. Indeed, the sermonist spends a mere fifteen lines on the pilgrimage comparison before moving on to the more everyday movement of the sea and the sun. Just as the sea continuously moves, the sermonist explains, “so shulde man here in þis liffe euermore be sterynge [leading] and worchynge [working] good [w]erkes.”53 And just as the sun unceasingly follows its daily east-to-west track in the sky, so should the layperson cultivate a daily routine of good works. Like the sun, never departing from its course, “lat hym do good werkes contynulye […] fulfilfilynge [his] course of goodness to þat he com to a good ende; as doth þe sonne, þat day by day ne letteþ nowthe [its] cours.”54 Running, going, coursing—the sermonist repeatedly uses verbs related to pedestrian movement to describe the nature of this life and the layperson’s ongoing struggle to live a life worthy of salvation. Although these verbs are all directed toward God and future salvation, they also point to tangible work in the here and now. With a clarifying pun, the sermonist explains that one gets to God not by traveling but by travailing:

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48. *Middle English Sermons*, 72, xlii.
49. Ibid., 74 (lines 26–27).
50. Ibid., 73 (lines 29–30).
51. Ibid., 74 (lines 3–5).
52. Ibid., 74 (line 29).
53. Ibid., 75 (lines 13–14).
54. Ibid., 75 (lines 33–38).
“3iff so be that he traveyll and goye besely þorow good [w]erkes,” he explains, the layperson will “com to þe londe of liff and blisse.”

Stasis and inaction are thus the hallmarks of sin: a man who is “not goy-inge ne wirchyng e [working] in good [w]erkes,” he explains, “vexþ corrupte and stynkyng e þorowe dedelye synne.” The person who does not walk in love does not perform the good works that outwardly express his or her own feelings of charity. The sermonist sharpens the connection between ambulation and charitable good works by invoking Augustine’s treatment of the foot of the soul in a discussion of the sciopod, a one-footed beast that offers an “ens-ample” of “how and in what maner þat we shall do and goye in þis werlde”:

I understand the beast with only one foot to be each Christian man and woman, who ought to have one love toward God and toward his or her fellow Christians. Love may be appropriately likened to a foot, for as St. Augustine says, *Pes meus, amor meus*—my foot is my love. This foot has five toes. The first toe is thinking about God often. The second toe is speaking to and telling other men about him often. The third toe is gladly hearing others speak about God. The fourth toe is fleeing things that God hates. The fifth toe is doing things that please God. On this foot of love, we should go God-ward, according to the teachings of the holy apostle St. Paul, in the fifth chapter of Ephesians: *Ambulate in dilecione*—go in love of God.

To walk in love is to do things that please God, and in doing these things, a person puts his or her feet on the right path. Carruthers has suggested that the sermonist never “goes anywhere” with his sciopod, that the fanciful image

55. Ibid., 76 (lines 29–30).
56. Ibid., 75 (lines 17–19).
57. Ibid., 77 (lines 3–4, 13–25).
serves primarily as a “compositional device” that helps him organize his thoughts. But the image also draws on a broader discourse that roots charity in the human body and in feet made for walking. Not all of the toes are linked with movement or works—while the fourth and fifth toes refer to fleeing from the bad and pursuing the good, the first three are linked with thinking, speaking, and listening. But together, the five toes make up a foot that can compel a person “Godwarde.” Although sciopods were often relegated to the monstrous outer margins of *mappae mundi*, as Carruthers reminds us, the one-legged “beeste” in this sermon perhaps also resembles Augustine’s singular foot of the soul or, in Gregory the Great’s formulation, the person who balances on the foot of the love of God without allowing the foot of the love of the earth to touch the ground.

### Churchward Steps

The *Ambulate*-sermonist opposes charitable movement with slothful inertia when he explains that the best way to stray from the path to salvation is by not doing anything at all, “not goyinge ne wirchynge in good [w]erkes.” Stasis and inaction were, of course, closely associated with sloth. For laypeople, the sin of sloth was often characterized by slowness in the service of God—delaying penance, neglecting one’s prayers, skipping or arriving late to the Mass. Sloth ran contrary to charity and to the love of God and neighbor because, as Chaucer’s Parson explains it, sloth squelched a person’s positive and productive desires: it “binimeth him the love of alle goodnesse,” leaving him feeling “anoyed and encombred.” And in annihilating positive desires, sloth could result in what the Parson calls “undevocioun,” a state of spiritual inaction that inhibits, among other things, the performance of good works. Bernard of Clairvaux associated *devotionis inopia*, or lack of devotion, with

59. Freccero notes that, in his homily on Ezekiel, Gregory “identifies the feet as love of God and love of the world.” When a soul “supports itself, with all virtue, on the love of God alone,” Gregory explains, it stands on one foot, the foot of love of God, and “suspend[s] above the earth the foot of the love of the world which it had been accustomed to placing on the ground.” “Firm Foot on a Journey without a Guide,” 40.
60. *Middle English Sermons*, 75 (lines 17–18).
62. “Thanne comth undevocioun, thurgh which a man is so blent, as seyth Seint Bernard, and hath swich langour in soule, that he may neyther rede ne singe in holy chirche, ne heere ne thinke of no devocioun, ne travaille with hise handes in no goode werk that it nis to him unsavory and al appalled.” Ibid., lines 723–24.
spiritual inertia in the monastery, but later authors, such as Chaucer, linked the absence of devotion with the end of charity itself. Indeed, while charitable good works were associated with physical movement and with the climb to salvation, sloth was construed as preventing laypeople from learning and practicing the very things that, as the author of the vernacular sermon collection *Jacob’s Well* (c. 1375–1400) puts it, “may rayse [them] vp fro deth of slowthe to þe lyif of deuocyoun & of amendment.” In sermons and handbooks, slothful inertia is consistently associated with a failure to move, a failure to rise up from sin. The slothful person flatly rejects the opportunities available to him or her, particularly the metaphorical ladder to heaven that charitable works and the avoidance of sin provided. In fact, in the *Book of Vices and Virtues*, the slothful person is compared to a prisoner who refuses to climb altogether, a prisoner who would rather languish and die than “clymbe vpon a ledder & goo his wey.”

Slothful *undevoicioun* rendered laypeople spiritually inert and uncharitable. It also isolated them from the church, in part by keeping them off their feet, and the author of *Jacob’s Well* emphasizes the slothful person’s physical remoteness. Early on in a sermon devoted to sloth, the *Well*-author suggests at some length that the sin involves loving one’s bed more than God:

> Thou louyst noȝt þi god feruently abouyn all thyng, but settyst þi loue slowly in god; & whan þou castyth þe all to lyuen in reste, & to slepe myche, to lyen longe in þi bed, & whanne þou louyst to sytten stylle & to don nouȝt ellys, to lenyn on þin elbowe, to lyen on-long on þi o syde.

You do not love your God fervently above everything else, but rather you set your love slowly in God; and when you apply yourself to living in rest

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63. In one of his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Bernard explains that *devotionis inopia* results in a monk’s inability to sing the psalms, read, meditate, or take pleasure in prayer. *Devotionis inopia* is associated with stumbling and falling: “Non sine causa sane ab heri et nudiustertius invasit me languor iste animi et mentis hebetudo, insolita quaedam inertia spiritus. Currebam bene; sed ecce lapis offensionis in via: impegi et corrui. Superbia inventa est in me, et Dominus declinavit in ira a servo suo. Hinc ista sterilitas animae meae, et devotionis inopia quam patrior.” Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 2:107–8, lines 20–24 [It is not without reason that this languour of soul, this dullness of mind has laid hold of me since yesterday and the day before, an unwonted impotence of the spirit. I was running well; but there in the way was the stumbling block: I tripped and fell. Pride was discovered in me, and the Lord has turned away in anger from his servant. Hence the barrenness of my spirit and the resourcelessness of devotion that I suffer]. English translation is taken from Walsh, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, 3:76.

64. *Jacob’s Well*, 116 (lines 32–33).


and sleeping too much, to lying for a long time in your bed; and when you love to sit and do nothing, to lean on your elbow, to lie on your side for a long time.

The slothful person’s love of sleep prevents him from learning his prayers and the basic tenets of the faith and also inhibits his ability to undertake “holy & gode occupacyouns.” More likely to be found in his bed than in the church nave, the slothful person is characterized by his spiritual inattention, his love of lying down, and his physical distance from the church. He “tarye[s] longe fro þe cherche & fro dyvyne seruyse,” and even stands outside the church-yard, afraid to enter it. If a “slow man” makes it to church at all, he sleeps his way through both the sermon and the prayers for the living and the dead. In his early fourteenth-century handbook *Handlyng Synne*, Robert Mannyng warns that lounging in bed in this life means languishing in Purgatory in the next: “For eury oure þat þou þer yn lay, / Yn purgatorye þou gest þy pay.”

Those who sleep late lose an opportunity to serve God, a failure that Mannyng emphasizes in an end-rhyme juxtaposition between not rising and not serving. As Mannyng brings his long discussion of sloth to a close, he returns to the idea of rising up, this time in reference not only to rising from sin and from the comfort of one’s bed but also to rising to a good end at the Last Judgment: “Ne be we nat slogh but sone vpryse, / Ne drede vs þan on no wyse, / But, hope alle to gode endyng.”

He may even be making a near-pun here on hoping (hopen) and hopping (hoppen), as Langland does in passus 17 of *Piers Plowman* with hope and hoppen—a verb that, like hoppen, refers to forward movement.

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67. Ibid., 104 (lines 2–3).
68. Ibid., 108 (line 7).
69. “Þou faryst as he þat dar noȝt entryn þe cherch-ȝerd for þe snayl þat puttyth his horn oute aȝens hym.” Ibid., 107 (lines 2–3).
70. Ibid., 103 (line 10).
73. Ibid., lines 5319–21.
74. In passus 17, Hope comes “hippyng,” only to “drawe” himself back, like a duck from a falcon, when he spots the Samaritan. “Hope cam hippyngge after, that hadde so ybosted / How he with Moyses maundement hadde many men yholpe; / Ac whan he hadde sighte of that segge, aside he gan hym drawe / Dredfully, bi this day, as doke dooth fram the faucon!” Langland, *Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text*, ed. Schmidt, 17.60–63. Unless otherwise indicated, all *Piers* quotations are taken from this edition of the B-text, hereafter referred to as Langland, *Piers Plowman. MED*, “hoppen” v., 2b: “to hop, leap, bound, bounce.” *MED*, “hippen” v., 1a: “of persons, animals, things: to leap, spring, hop, bounce.”
The slothful person's physical and spiritual remoteness from church comes with dire consequences, even exclusion from its prayer network, and the Well-author illustrates the problem with a shocking tale of postmortem disenfranchisement. The story takes place during the burial service for a man who was notoriously “slawe and sluggy” when it came to church attendance. “Slawly he com to þe cherche, & selde [seldom], & late,” the Well-author writes, and once there, he spent his time either sleeping or jangling so loudly that it “let-tyd [prevented] manye òperate fro þe heryng [hearing] of dyvin seruyse.” During the Office of the Dead, “whil his body lay on þe bere [bier] in þe cherche, & clerkys seydin ‘Placebo & dirige’ for his soule,” something astonishing happens: the crucifix comes to life. The figure of Jesus unpins his hands from the cross in order to cover his ears and muffle the sound of prayers being said on the slothful man’s behalf:

Þe crucifix on þe bere loosyd his handys fro þe crosse, & stoppyd his eerys wyth his handys. Þe peple seyȝ þis, & merueyledyn sore. An holy preest prayid god wyth þe peple, to wyten what þat ment. A voys fro a-bouyn seye to hem: “Þis cursyd man wolde neuer for slauthe heryn my woord, ne don þer-after, ne heryn my seruyse in holy cherch deoultly; þerfore, his soule is in powere of feendys dampnyd. Þerfore, myn ymage on þe cros stoppyth his erys, to schewe ȝou þat I, god, stoppe myn erys in heuen, þat I here no prayere prayed for hym in holy cherche. Þerfore, prayeth no more for hym, for he is dampnyd.”

The crucifix on the bier lifted his hands from the cross and stopped his ears. The people saw this and marveled. A holy priest prayed with the people in order to understand what it meant. A voice from above said to them, “This cursed man would never, because of sloth, hear my word or follow it, nor would he devoutly hear my service in church. Therefore his soul is in the power of damned fiends. Therefore, my image on the cross stops his ears to show that I, God, stop my ears in heaven, and that I hear none of the prayers said for him in holy church. Therefore, pray no more for him, because he is damned.”

The story puts the consequences of sloth in stark relief: God turns a deaf ear on prayers uttered on behalf of those who do not listen to the Mass and

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75. Jacob’s Well, 110 (line 16).
76. Ibid., 110 (lines 16–17, 19–20).
77. Ibid., 110 (lines 21–22).
78. Ibid., 110 (lines 22–32).
those who come to church late or not at all. Slothful uninvolvement ultimately results in exclusion from the parish and its prayers. When God stops his ears and refuses to hear any prayers on the man’s behalf, he denies him access to one of the major spiritual benefits of parochial membership. The story of the deaf crucifix illustrates the spiritual and physical remoteness that sloth can engender, both in this life and after death. Indeed, the man’s spotty church attendance and his inattention in the nave not only cut him off from the prayers of the parish but render him even further removed from future salvation; with no prayers to speed him, the slothful man now faces, at best, a much longer tenure in Purgatory.

In distancing themselves from the church, slothful people ultimately distance themselves from heaven, and the Well-author punctuates this point at the end of the sermon by turning to the theme of walking. The final exemplum concerns a hermit who, for the sake of his own convenience, thinks about moving his cell closer to the well where he gets his water. He “thouȝte to haue esyd hym wyth schortere travayle.” An angel appears to “folowyyn hym, & tellyn his steppys” and explains why the move might not be a good idea. While the devil will count the hermit’s “synne ward” steps, the angel keeps a tally of his hardworking steps: “I noumbre þi steppys in þi trauayle,” the angel claims, “for to schewyn þe noumbr þerof a-for god aȝens þe feend, þat þou ther-thruȝ thow aȝens þe feend, þat þou ther-thruȝ mowe haue mede [be rewarded] in heuen” The hermit accordingly moves his cell further away in order to have “manyere steppys” and “more mede.” Shifting his attention back to his lay listeners, the Well-author explains that, while “þe feend wryteth & noumbryth þe slauthe [sloth], slugnes [laziness], & ydelnes, idell woordys, ianglyng, & þi rownyng [snoring] in cherche,” angels keep track of their “steppys to cherche ward.”

**Mangled Feet**

As part of the effort to link sloth with inaction and physical remoteness, late medieval depictions of the sin pay close attention to the sinner’s feet, often associating them with disease and deformity. In the *Prick of Conscience*, for example, when the author catalogs the maladies that souls will endure in Purgatory, he condemns the slothful to “þe potagre and þe gout,” both of which

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79. Ibid., 111 (line 7).
80. Ibid., 111 (lines 9–10).
81. Ibid., 111 (lines 15, 11–14).
82. Ibid., 111 (lines 18–19).
83. Ibid., 111 (lines 20–21, 25).
caused painful inflammation in the joints of the feet and toes. And in a gruesome rendering of the “deformed and myschapyn” Seven Deadly Sins from a fifteenth-century Carthusian miscellany, sloth has broken and mangled feet. An accompanying prose text describes the image as “a vision of saules þat war damned & put to helle after þe jugement,” some of whom, presumably the slothful, “had fete al to gnawyn and bun [bound] as þai wer brokyn.”

The Well-author also turns to diseased feet, this time in a story about avarice that, like his exempla about sloth, encourages sinners to get back on the path to salvation through good works and the avoidance of sin. The story begins by chronicling a good man’s eventual consumption by avarice. After a lifetime of giving “all þat he myȝt spare” to the poor, he begins to think more about himself than those in need:

In his age he dredde pouerte, & to ben bedrede, noȝt trustyng full þat god schulde kepyn hym in his age as he dede in his ȝouthe. He lefte almes-dede, & ȝaf hym full to coueytise, & gaderyd hym to-gedere a grete summe of monye. Panne fell on his fote a maladye, þat it rotyd, & in lechecraft he spendyd all þat he had gaderyd.

In his old age, he was afraid of becoming poor and bedridden. He did not trust that God would take care of him in his later years the way He had when he was young. He abandoned almsgiving and gave himself over to avarice, and he accrued for himself a great sum of money. Then his foot began to rot, and he spent everything that he had saved on medical care.

The man abandons almsgiving and gives himself over to greed, ultimately refocusing all of his energy on himself and his own coffers. He is so thoroughly covetous that the sin eats away at his body, causing his foot to rot and ultimately confining him to his bed, a site the Well-author elsewhere associates with both spiritual neglect and social isolation. Facing the amputation of his foot, the avaricious man experiences a kind of charitable conversion as he weeps in his bed the night before his operation:

> Whyle I gaf almes, I was heyl in alle my lymes, to getyn my lyiflode, & now, in my coueytise, I am lame, and to-morwyn my rotyn foot schal be smyten of. My monye is spent þer-aboute, I am a beggere. Allas, þat euer gadryd I

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84. *Prick of Conscience*, line 2993.
85. Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 252–56 and fig. 6.25; qtd. in Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, 237, n. 64.
86. *Jacob’s Well*, 125 (lines 7–14).
monye on hepe, to trustyn þere-vpon, & lefte myn almisede! God, I cry þe mercy!\textsuperscript{87}

While I gave alms, my limbs were healthy enough to help me earn my living. Now, in my avarice, I am lame, and tomorrow my rotten foot will be cut off. My money has been spent, and I am a beggar. Alas that I ever trusted that heap of money and gave up almsgiving! God, I cry mercy!

An angel appears, and when the man repents—“I haue synned!”\textsuperscript{88}—the angel touches his foot and heals it. When the doctor arrives the next morning “to smyten of his fote,” he finds his patient “goyng at þe plowȝ, for he had founde a bettyr leche þan him.”\textsuperscript{89} The story of the rotten foot appears in a section devoted to avarice, but it makes a broader appeal to the idea of going toward God through penance and good works. As we know from the \textit{Ambulate} sermon, Augustine likened charitable love to a foot that moves in the direction of God rather than sin, and in \textit{Jacob's Well}, rotten feet set selfish misers on the wrong path: “Here [their] fote, þat is, here [their] loue rotyth in coueytise,” the \textit{Well}-author writes, “þat þei loue noȝt god, ne holy cherch, ne pore peple, ne truthe, ne vertue.”\textsuperscript{90} And the more they “rotyn in here [their] foot of loue,” the more they drift away from God and the church, and “the slawlyere [they] gon to goddys servyse, & þe we rse kepyn þe halyday & goddys comaundmentys.”\textsuperscript{91}

The story of the rotten foot points to the destruction wreaked by greed, but it also speaks to the more general concern that those who sin do not go the way of God, nor do they contribute to the charitable and penitential practices so closely associated with the parish. The exemplum chronicles an avaricious man’s retreat from both; he trades almsgiving for avarice, and the rotting of his foot causes him to focus his attention on bodily “lechecraft” rather than his spiritual health.\textsuperscript{92} Importantly, however, the man changes his course through penance, and the next morning he rises from his bed and plows his fields. The man’s last-minute repentance gives him readmittance into the penitential economy of the parish while his turn to the plow taps into the traditional spiritualization of agrarian metaphor, a topic to which I turn my attention in chapter 4. Given the distinctively collective nature of agricultural labor, the man’s plowing perhaps also signals his renewed commitment

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 125 (lines 17–22).
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 125 (lines 27–28).
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 125 (lines 30–32).
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 126 (lines 1–3).
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 126 (lines 18–20).
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 125 (line 13).
to work that benefits others. Indeed, we might be reminded here of Chaucer’s plowman, the “trewe swinker” who loves God and neighbor and lives in “pees and parfit charitee.”93 In the Well-author’s sermon, a layman who had retreated from charity and penance resumes both on healthy feet.

The “Wikkede Way” to Salvation

The metaphorical association between walking and salvation receives one of its most extended treatments in Piers Plowman, an epic poem framed and motivated by the motif of pedestrian movement.94 Replete with walkers, wanderers, and pilgrims, the poem begins with the narrator resting on a hillside, weary from wandering, and ends with Conscience vowing to “walken as wide as the worlde lasteth” as he searches for Piers.95 The theme even dictates the poem’s formal division into passus, or steps.96 Langland first activates the relationship between foot travel, charity, and salvation in passus 1, when the dreaming narrator encounters the figure of Holy Church. Their wide-ranging dialogue centers on the question of salvation—the narrator wants to know how to save his soul. Throughout their conversation, Holy Church returns again and again to truth and love and the role that both should play in shaping individuals and communities. Her discussion of Lucifer’s fall introduces the traditional association of godly feet with good works and salvation; Lucifer put his foot in the north, Holy Church explains, via Augustine, and plummeted down to hell.97 But those who “werche wel,” she instructs, will end in truth and may be sure, moreover, that their souls will “wende to he vene.”98 Truth is the very product of love, Holy Church tells the bewildered dreamer, and it inheres in both working well and in avoiding sin. Toward the end of the passus, Holy Church uses the exhortatory letter of James to draw an explicit

93. Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, fragment 1, lines 531–32.
94. For Zeeman, the “activity of travel” constitutes “the great imaginative motif of the whole work.” “Piers Plowman and the Pilgrimage to Truth,” 8–9. Dyas observes multiple “modes” and “patterns” of pilgrimage in Langland’s poem. Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 145–70.
95. Langland, Piers Plowman, 20.382.
96. As Davlin observes in “Devotional Postures in Piers Plowman B,” 162. And yet although “the poem’s own name for its divisions” seems to suggest “the stages of a journey,” Middleton warns that “attempts to recount the whole narration of this journey as a developing succession of acts and events tend to emphasize discontinuity rather than progression.” “Narration and the Invention of Experience,” 92.
98. Langland, Piers Plowman, 1.130, 132.
connection between faith, works, and human feet. “James the genitile jugged in hise bokes,” she says,

That feith withouten feet is feblere than nought,
And as deed as a dorenail but if the dedes folwe [follow]:
Fides sine operibus mortua est. [Faith without works is dead.]\(^99\)

As Mary Carruthers points out, Holy Church’s translation of *fides sine operibus* employs a bilingual pun on *feet* and *faites*, the French word for deeds.\(^100\) In doing so, it also taps into the broader association of devotion, charity, and the avoidance of sin with foot travel: faith requires deeds (*faites*), and deeds require feet. Without the two, faith is defunct and inert—a claim that brings to mind the Parson’s warning that sloth can lead to the death of body and soul.\(^101\)

Holy Church’s pun is part of her extended commentary on Truth, the meaning of which she never fully clarifies for the dreamer. Her inability to do so becomes, in Laurie Finke’s formulation, “a measure of the difference or the distance between language and what it represents,” a distance that leaves the dreamer longing for “a language that can express experience unequivocally.”\(^102\) The dreamer wants to know what truth is, but even more importantly, he wants to know where it is and how to get there. The bilingual pun that Holy Church offers by way of explanation only complicates things further because parsing its meaning requires a process of translation, analysis, and contextualization.\(^103\) Her later description of love as the “gate that goth into hevene” is perhaps even more problematic in this vein because it makes an implicit reference to the concept of walking—one walks through an open gate—without explicitly connecting that idea to her earlier example of faith that has no feet at all.\(^104\) Holy Church moves from footless faith to the implied footpath to heaven’s gates without ever explaining how the footless layperson might acquire feet, or how he might then use those feet as a means to salvation.

Will’s allegorical map to truth at the end of passus 5 would seem to work toward closing this interpretive gap. In passus 1, the dreamer repeat-

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\(^99\) Ibid., 1.185–87.


\(^101\) Sloth results in the “deeth of the soule and of the body also.” Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 10, lines 726–27.

\(^102\) Finke, “Truth’s Treasure: Allegory and Meaning in *Piers Plowman*,” 59.

\(^103\) Finke observes that “although the question changes, the rhetorical context does not. Commentary necessitates further commentary. Texts proliferate, but the substance, the thing that Will seeks, remains unattainable.” Ibid., 61.

\(^104\) Langland, *Piers Plowman*, 1.205.
edly asks for instruction on truth and on soul saving, and at the end of passus 5, it is Piers who offers the very kind of practical information that the dreamer has been longing for. After the well-known confession of the Seven Deadly Sins, and after Repentance’s long prayer to God, “a thousand of men” respond to Hope’s rallying cry by asking Christ to grant them the grace to “go to Truthe.” But because nobody knows the way there, they wander around aimlessly like beasts on a hillside. They come upon a decorated pilgrim who, despite his many badges, can offer no help. He knows nothing about Truth or his shrine, and he has never heard any other pilgrim ask about it, either. At this very moment, Piers the Plowman appears and offers to show them the way to truth. “If ye wilneth to wite where that he dwell-eth,” he claims, “I shal wisse yow the wey wel right to his place.” He then provides a complex map of an allegorical itinerary that begins in the region of meekness, conscience, and neighborly love before winding through the Ten Commandments and ending at the castle of Truth. Each place on the map corresponds to a spiritual or behavioral ideal: for example, after “go[ing] thorough Mekenesse” and “com[ing] into Conscience,” Piers tells his listeners to proceed along a brook called “Beth-buxom-of-speche” until they come to a ford called “Youre-fadres-honoureth.” As the itinerary adheres more and more closely to specific catechetical teachings (moving from the general principle of Meekness, for example, to one of the Ten Commandments), the places become longer and longer strings of words: “Swere-noght-but-if-it-be-for-nede-/And-nameliche-on-ydel-the-name-of-God-almyghty,” and “Coveite-noght-mennes-catel-ne-hire-wyves-/Ne-noon-of-hire-servaunts-that-noyen-hem-myghte.”

The map seems to offer a fairly straightforward and practical solution to the problem faced by the wandering beast-pilgrims who cannot find their way. In associating the journey to Truth with foot travel, the passage dishes up a panoply of verbs related to movement—bowen, lepen, blenchen, for example. Piers warns the pilgrims to keep moving at certain locations—“stynt

105. Ibid., 5.510, 512.
106. “Ac there was wight noon so wys, the wey thider kouthe, / But blustreden forth as beestes over baches and hilles.” Ibid., 5.513–14.
108. Ibid., 5.501–62.
110. Ibid., 5.570–71, 573–74.
112. “Ye shul lepe the lightloker.” Langland, Piers Plowman, 5.569. MED, “lepen” v., 4a: “to travel by hops or jumps, bound.”
113. “Thanne shaltow blenche at a bergh.” Langland, Piers Plowman, 5.580. MED, “blenchen” v., 2a: “to change one’s course, turn (in a certain direction); turn around, retreat.”
CHAPTER 3

thow noght,” he says, at the stumps called “Do not steal” and “Do not kill”—an injunction that brings to mind the *Ambulate* sermon and its emphasis on going rather than standing still.\(^{114}\) The pilgrimage map presents the journey to truth as a step-by-step process, a point that the pilgrims themselves seem to acknowledge when they express their longing for a guide that can “folwen [them] ech a foot.”\(^{115}\)

At first glance, then, Piers’s map to truth seems right at home with the traditional association of walking with spiritual action—what better way to take up Paul’s injunction about walking in love than with a pedestrian tour of neighborly love and the Ten Commandments? Although the map and its wordy place-names may compensate for earlier linguistic and interpretive problems, as others have suggested,\(^{116}\) I want to focus instead on the map’s misleading emphasis on *travel* rather than *travail.* What makes Langland’s treatment of the metaphor of walking so different from what we have encountered in vernacular sermons is that, in insisting that the way to truth constitutes a pilgrimage, he focuses less on walking as spiritual work that is ongoing and labor-intensive and more on walking as a means to a particular geographical end. This is a map that reduces lifelong spiritual and behavioral goals into single-stop destinations and, as Mary Carruthers observes, fundamentally misconstrues actions as things:

> The Ten Commandments are commands to action; one either does them or not. They are not really like brooks or towns or crofts, to be waded through or avoided. And to make substantives of them, things rather than actions, is to distort their real nature and to employ a false analogy.\(^{117}\)

In representing the Ten Commandments as places rather than calls to action, the map ignores the importance of action itself. “Do not Covet” is not a place a person can walk to but rather an objective that a person achieves by actively eschewing covetousness: the work of becoming noncovetous is itself the goal, and yet Piers’s map divorces that goal from the diligent, lifelong effort that


\(^{115}\) Langland, *Piers Plowman*, 6.2.

\(^{116}\) Finke suggests, for example, that the map’s “plodding, one-to-one correspondence between physical place and spiritual state” compensates for earlier epistemological failures. “Truth’s Treasure,” 63. For Mann, the map’s wordy place-names “are naked of metaphor, simply straightforward didactic exhortations which refer themselves directly to real life.” *Langland and Allegory*, 18–19.

\(^{117}\) Carruthers, *Search for St. Truth*, 64. See also Aers, who observes that Will’s “attractive map” nevertheless “assumes the very resources that sinners lack.” *Salvation and Sin*, 104.
meeting it would require. The map implies, moreover, that there is only one way to achieve salvation, that no alternate or circuitous routes will suffice: travelers must visit each of these sites, and in the order prescribed.

The map’s shift from actual pilgrimage to a more interiorized or imaginary pilgrimage further obscures the relationship between walking and work. The journey is an interior one, it turns out, and Piers’s listeners learn that once they have crossed the moat of mercy and entered through the gate of grace, they will find truth within themselves. But the work of getting to Truth—the work of living a life worthy of salvation—cannot be relegated to the imagination. Indeed, the point is not to imagine, but to act—to insure future salvation, that is, by making the climb, by doing the very things that bring one incrementally closer to God. Although the map assumes a journey on foot, it never takes full advantage of walking as a way of thinking through the active and laborious effort involved in saving oneself. It misconstrues the very travail of getting saved as travel, a pun that Langland deploys much later in the poem, when the dreamer first learns about the Tree of Charity: “I wolde travaile [. . .] this tree to se, twenty hundred myle,” he claims, as if charity were something he could travel to rather than travail at or perform.

We might be reminded here of the Middle English Ambulate sermon and its very different use of this pun; the only way to “come to þe londe of liff and blisse,” the sermonist claims, is to “traveyll,” by which he means to “go besely þorowe good [w]erkes.” As we have seen in a variety of texts, the metaphor of spiritually efficacious walking offered sermonists a way of aligning charity, the avoidance of sin, and the pursuit of salvation with bodily action and effort. To do these things is to climb one’s way to God. Unlike the places along Piers’s map, charity is not a destination, but a practice, and a lifelong one.

The actions that Piers transforms into dots on a map are also tenets and ideals that were taught from the parish pulpit: neighborly love, the Ten Commandments, the efficacy of penance, prayer, and almsgiving. But as pit stops on a pilgrimage route, they have been physically separated from truth and geographically removed from the parish, its rituals, and its teaching. Instead of being learned and practiced by a parish community, these ideals have become short-term stops to be visited just once by an ad hoc group of strang-

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118. Strange has argued that Langland “flatten[s]” working into walking. “Willful Tropc,” 30.
119. As Harwood puts it, “to have disobeyed one dictate of the moral conscience would be to have turned aside from the road and never have got to Truth.” “Piers Plowman” and the Problem of Belief, 149.
120. “And if Grace graunte thee to go in in this wise / Thow shalt see in thiselwe Truthe sitte in thyn herte / In a cheyne of charite.” Langland, Piers Plowman, 5.605–7.
121. Ibid., 16.10.
122. Middle English Sermons, 76 (lines 29–30).
ers on their way to someplace else. They have also been wrested away from the parish pulpit. Vernacular handbooks and sermon collections, filled as they are with treatments of the very topics that appear along Piers’s pilgrimage route, were designed for use in the parish where, whether their contents were expounded by priests during their sermons or during confession, they formed part of a network of visual images, ritual practices, and local customs.

The step-by-step process of achieving salvation through charitable living and the avoidance of sin motivated and structured the ritual life of the parish. As a fundamentally collective enterprise, the charitable ideal was perhaps most fully expressed when the parish was on its feet in procession. Bearing palms a week before Easter or tracing the perimeter of the churchyard at Rogation, the parish walked together, celebrating its collective passage from sin to virtue while also acknowledging the many steps yet to come on the long road to salvation. Parishioners were reminded of the importance of staying on task—of putting one foot in front of the other, as it were—throughout the liturgical year. They participated in processions, of course, but they also listened to ambulate-themed sermons about scio pods, rotten-footed sinners, and angels who count churchward steps. And when they left church at the end of the Mass, they were exhorted to go with God. Ite, missa est, the priest would say—go, Mass is finished. Laypeople were taught to listen for the ite: “When þou heris say ite,” writes the author of the Lay Folks Mass Book, “þen is þo messe al done.” A signal that the end is in sight, the command cues the congregation’s final prayer of thanksgiving before going. But the ite also issues a call to action beyond the walls of the church—a call not just to go, but to go with God. After the final prayer, “welþou may / In gods name wende þi wæy.”

In the parish church of St. George in Trotton (West Sussex), a late fourteenth-century mural on the west wall of the nave offers a kind of visual guide to meeting this closing injunction (fig. 4). Christ sits in judgment on a rainbow at top center with the Seven Deadly Sins to his right and the Corporal Works of Mercy to his left; below him, Moses holds a pair of tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. As a depiction of the Last

123. Lay Folks Mass Book, 56 (lines 604, 606).
124. Ibid., 58 (lines 608–9).
126. This “accidental transposition” contradicts Matt. 25:31–33, in which the saved appear to God’s right and the damned to his left; others have interpreted the reversal differently, sug-
Figure 4. The Trotton Doom, West Sussex (c. 1380–90). Photograph © Dawn Hutchison.
Judgment, the painting explicitly links charitable living with salvation: those who enact the Corporal Works will, like the naked soul at top right, enjoy an angelic welcome into the community of the saved. But the mural offers more than a glimpse into the future end of time. I want to suggest that, by virtue of its unusual location on the back wall of the church, the mural also reinforces the traditional association of charitable living with the mundane, step-by-step pursuit of salvation. Last Judgment paintings typically appear on the chancel arch above the high altar, looming over the congregation as they observe the Mass. At Trotton, however, the mural appears at the opposite end of the church, looming over the congregation as they turn around to exit the building, its imagery not only evoking the priest’s closing injunction about going with God but encouraging the viewer to respond to that injunction by walking in charity rather than sin. The mural’s guide to salvation certainly resonates with Piers’s allegorical map to truth: follow the example set on the right side of the painting, the Trotton mural seems to suggest, and when you have completed the works of mercy, look for an angel and a cloud-shaped path leading to heaven.127 But instead of transforming lifelong practices into external places that have been disconnected from the ritual life of the parish, the Trotton mural offers a program of actions explicitly linked to the parish and its teaching. Avoid sin, keep the commandments, perform acts of charity: this is the stuff of Sunday sermons, a visual rendering of what parishioners regularly heard from the pulpit and a reminder of the liturgy’s consistent emphasis on social reconciliation and mutual help. The mural issues a parting reminder to all parishioners as they walk west before exiting: *ite, missa est*—wendi Godward.

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127. Benson has suggested that the mural’s iconographical program as a whole not only “shows the visual conventions that lie behind *Piers*” but also “suggests their popular reception.” Public “*Piers Plowman,*” 188.