

Text: Mark 6: 1-13
Title: Traveling Light
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I am going to Israel in August. I was selected to be part of the first “Holy Land Pastoral Renewal Pilgrimage” sponsored and funded by Austin Seminary. For 18 days, with 19 other pastors from a variety of Christian traditions, we will journey from the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem and then down to the Dead Sea. The pilgrimage is designed as renewal for “mid-career pastors.” While we will trace the way of Jesus through Capernaum, Nazareth, and the Garden of Gethsemane, we also spend time in worship, reflection, and conversation.

The trip is less than a month away and I haven’t thought about it very much. When I do I mostly worry about having to “share” in a small group or I wonder about what to pack. I am not a savvy traveler. So, I was relieved when the seminary sent a guide book with a variety of instructions ~ including that we should carry laundry detergent with which to wash our clothes in the sink. Now, this is foreign to me. I am a sink-as-washing-machine-virgin. But, if this is the case than I really only need two sets of clothes: one to wear and one to wash and I’ll just rotate every day.

Of course, I’ll need to pack work-out clothes and running shoes....

And, do you need a coat or a sweater for summer nights in Galilee?

And, what about my lap top?

And, how will I communicate with my family?

And, what if my roommate snores ~ should I get some of those noise canceling headphones?

And, how will I keep my passport and money safe?

And, can I wear shorts?

And, and...

You get the idea. I find myself worrying more about how to pack and what to take rather than wondering about the actual journey. Maybe that’s my unique affliction, or maybe it’s the typical reflex of an American consumer, or maybe when we worry about our physical stuff we effectively stiff arm the spiritual stuff, or maybe mine is a universal concern..... For, when Jesus sent out his first disciples he didn’t provide instructions about what to take, but he gave instructions about what to leave behind.

Dear friends, on this mid-summer morning I invite you to consider travel, packing, and the instructions of Jesus as an image for the life of faith.

What is essential for the journey?

What do we need to carry as pilgrims?

What can we leave behind?

Our text details the first “mission trip” in Christian history. Jesus gathers the twelve disciples and sends them out two by two. Now, mind you in the first five chapters of Mark’s gospel all that these disciples have done to distinguish themselves is:

- Fail to understand Jesus' parables and need explanations.
- Fumble about in fear after Jesus calmed the squall on the Sea of Galilee asking each other, “Who then is this?”
- Question Jesus for wondering who touched him in the crowd.

But here, after Jesus is rejected in his own home town, he sends them forth to preach repentance, heal the sick, and cast out demons. Clearly this is proof that God doesn't necessarily “choose the qualified but qualifies the chosen.” (That is such a cheesy preacher line....)

What is remarkable is that Jesus sends them out in a way that makes them dependent on others. Without satchel, coin, or bread they are will need to rely on others for a place to sleep and a meal to eat. Without cloak or comfort they will be at the mercy of others. He sends them in need of the people to whom they are being sent.

It is an odd command, but it is also a form of travel that Jesus knew something about. A babe in a manger is unmistakably one who comes in need of those to whom he or she is delivered.

Jesus came needing to be fed and changed and bathed.

Jesus submitted to the care of others.

Jesus was born dependent on the hospitality of humanity.

Jesus died dependent on the rejection of humanity.

And, Jesus sends out his disciples in a similar fashion.

D.T. Niles, a theologian from Sri Lanka, writes of Jesus:

He was a true servant because he was at the mercy of those whom he came to serve... This weakness of Christ, we his disciples must share. To serve from a position of power is not true service but beneficence

So, in some sense the instruction to travel without bag, bread, or money-belt, is in keeping with the self emptying way of God in Christ. To be a disciple of Jesus is to follow the way of servant-hood, of shedding place, of letting go of power, of vulnerability. Jesus calls us to travel lightly even unto death. Gulp!

Allow a little aside:

It strikes me that in “mission” we often go with our hands full, rather than our hands empty. We bring food, medicine, technology, clean water, education, and cultural expectation. We bring our great strength to other’s great need. I don’t know any other way, but it certainly fixes a relationship of power, or it encourages pride in the giver and dependence, or gratitude, or humiliation in the

receiver. And, I am not sure that that tension is quickly resolved by assigning it simply to a question of attitude.

But, back to the idea that to follow the way of Christ is to travel light.
Sometimes life will help you unload extra baggage.
Sometimes circumstances conspire to strip us down to the bone.
Sometimes we shed things because we have no other choice.

I saw a man in the hospital a few hours before open heart surgery. He was surrounded by the finest doctors in one of the best hospitals, he was connected to the best tools and technologies, and he had access to the top shelf of the medicine cabinet. He had considered every eventuality and done everything right to prepare himself, and prepare his wife, and yet...

And yet, in the surgery prep room he squeezed his eyes into knots fighting back tears, and said that he was scared because all he had left was his trust in God, and he wasn't sure that his faith was strong enough. (As if God had a measuring scale....) He said over and over again that he kept thinking that it was in God's hands now. He had done everything he could and knew that whatever happened, come death or healing, all that was left was God's mercy. He was stripped down to some base trust. He couldn't carry anything more.

Or, a good friend reminded me recently that the beginning place of recovery for an addict or an alcoholic is the recognition that they are powerless, that...
all of their answers,
all of their power,
all of their baggage,
all of their solutions were found worthless and wanting.

And, the first whiff of recovery is an empty hand. There is nothing left to trust but a higher power. There is nothing left to carry ~ no satchel, no flask, no strength.

Sometimes we need to shed things and sometimes the circumstances of life will do that work for us. Sometimes the circumstances of life conspire to strip us down to nothing but an essential trust in Jesus.

That is not to consign God to the "Great Lesson Teacher in the Sky" who fiddles with the details of life, but it is the recognition that faith is not a matter of adding more things, faith is often unloading things, until we are left with nothing but Jesus.

I don't know what you are carrying this morning.
I don't know what baggage is slung over your shoulder.
I don't know what weighs you down.
I do know that some of us carry concerns about work and finances and health and children and addictions and how we'll take one more step....
Can we be encouraged to set down what clutters and trust Jesus?
May the Spirit of God give us such mercy.

The story is told that Peter Bernadone, a powerful trader in the textile industry, built a great empire that he wanted to pass along to his two sons Francis and Angelo. But, Francis ~ after a run of lavish youthful indiscretion ~ became increasingly dissatisfied with his life. Business did not capture his imagination and hedonism did not capture his heart.

Rather, he began to practice a pattern of disinvestment, giving generously to the poor. And eventually, believing that he was following the voice and will of God, he took some of his inheritance and some of his father's wealth and began a project to restore the crumbling dilapidated chapel in San Damiano.

When Peter Bernadone learned that Francis was squandering the family estate he dragged him back home, beat him severely, and chained him in the basement until he came to his senses ~ clearly a different approach than taken by the father in the parable of the prodigal son.

But, when his father was gone a business trip, Francis convinced his mother to release him and he returned to San Damiano to continue his mission. Of course, when Bernadone returned he was enraged and he appealed to the Bishop to intervene, because surely the church wouldn't condone this abuse of wealth.

At a hearing before the Bishop in the Piazza of Saint Mary Major Peter Bernadone rehearsed his litany of complaints. The Bishop turned to Francis for his response. But, Francis withdrew to a room in the Bishop's palace, disrobed, folded his clothes into a neat pile and returned to the piazza ~ completely naked. He walked up to his father, handed him the clothes with a bag of money on top, and announced:

Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Until now, I have called Peter Bernadone my father. But, because I have proposed to serve God, I return the money and all the clothing that is his, wanting to say that from now on, "My Father who is in heaven," and not "My father Peter Bernadone..."

And with that Peter Bernadone stormed home and Saint Francis of Assisi pursued a life without bag, bread, or money belt in service to God.

Now, I am not sure that Jesus instructions to travel light are to be taken literally by all disciples for all time. Otherwise the song would go, "They will know we are Christian's by our nakedness....."

But we can proclaim that our essential trust ~
is not in our power or our piety,
it is not in our theologies or our personal philosophies,
it is not in what we do or what we doubt,
it is not in the strength with which we carry a load,
it is not in the conviction that animates our steps,
it is not in our music or our memory,

Our essential trust is in Jesus.

Our naked faith is that we belong, body and soul, to Jesus.

And dear friends, I am not sure that scripture, faith, or Jesus intend to provide answers to questions of science, economic systems, political platforms, grooming instructions, or packing plans. I am not sure that the scriptures intend to offer answers for every modern ethical dilemma

But, what is essential; what is finally of ultimate concern, trust, and comfort, is that Jesus has defeated every twisted expression of sin and death ~ and therefore there is nothing to fear.

You can travel lightly.

Jesus is sovereign Lord.

Amen.