

“Travelling Light”

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Sunday, July 4, 2010—Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Anyone who’s packed for a trip knows the challenge of the task. Even when I go to Chicago for just a few days, I always go through a whole mental exercise involving what to bring. Will it be hot? Better bring a pair of shorts. Will it be cold? Better bring a sweatshirt. What about rain? Bring the umbrella. Will I go to the beach? Bathing suit. Walk in the park? Walking shoes. Suppose I spill ketchup on those jeans? Better bring an extra pair. Out to dinner? Dress shoes. Down time? Bring reading material. Will I be working on next week’s sermon? Bring the laptop. What if I meet up with old friends? Bring the tennis racket. The list of possible contingencies for which to prepare is endless, and if you’re packing for more than one person, the stuff increases exponentially. But planning what to pack is only the beginning. Then you have to figure out how to get all that stuff from point A to point B. If you’re lucky, you can load up your car and unload someplace close to where you’ll be staying. When I go to Chicago, everything I pack has to be carried from the garage on the ground floor to our condo on the third floor. No matter how many times I do it, I always conclude I packed too much stuff. It makes me think of the Latin word for baggage, which is *impedimenta*, from which we get the English word impediment. That’s the perfect image for baggage. It’s the stuff we carry that holds us back and gets in our way as we’re going from one place to another. Hold that image in your mind, because today Jesus has a message for us about the *impedimenta* we carry with us on our journey of discipleship.

In this morning’s reading, Jesus sends out seventy of his followers, two by two, on a mission to prepare people to hear the gospel. And he gives them a bunch of instructions about what how they are to carry out this mission. One of his first instructions is, travel light. As Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation, *The Message*, “Bring your comb and toothbrush and no extra baggage.” We can debate how literally to take him. Most commentators seem to think Jesus really meant it about leaving all that *impedimenta* behind. His intention was that his followers would have to depend not on themselves and what they could carry with them, but on the hospitality of others. When you depend on others in order to be fed and housed, it teaches you something. It tells you that none of us, not one, gets through life without help from others. One of the speakers at Jonathan’s graduation said: asking for help when you need it is a sign of your strength, not a mark of weakness. To which I think Jesus would have said, Amen.

But we who want to be disciples of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century no longer travel from place to place, seeking hospitality from strangers as we carry out the work Jesus has entrusted to us. So, our challenge this morning is to think about what travelling light means for us today as we seek to fulfill our mission to share with the world, the good news of a loving, forgiving, compassionate God. The word that Christians use to refer to this mission that Jesus has entrusted to us is evangelism, which comes from the Greek word meaning good news.

But if you look at how individual Christians define evangelism, I think you’ll find one huge piece of baggage that Jesus would urge us to leave behind. A lot of folks think of evangelism the

way Lucy explained it to Charlie Brown . “I’m an evangelist,” Lucy brags, and Charlie Brown asks what an evangelist is.

“It’s someone who convinces others that my religion is better than yours.”

“And you can do that?” Charlie Brown wants to know.

“Absolutely,” Lucy says, “I just did it yesterday.”

“That’s impressive,” Charlie Brown says, “How did you do it?”

And Lucy says: “I hit the kid on the head with my lunch box.”

Not only is this the understanding of evangelism that has made its way into popular culture, it’s the way a lot of Christians think about evangelism, too. No wonder we run for the nearest exit when someone starts talking about it. No wonder we go into panic mode when someone suggests we should be doing it. But if you take a look at what Jesus sent his disciples out to do, you’ll see it doesn’t have anything to do with cornering people, hitting them over the head with Jesus talk and demanding to know where they think they’ll spend eternity if they were to die tonight. Jesus does not send his followers out with instructions to convince, much less to threaten people into believing the correct set of principles about him. He tells them to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near. What does this mean? It means that although the world as it is, is not the world that God intends, we can see signs around us right now that God is at work in our midst and that a new kind of world is coming to be. And what are these signs? Jesus says we are the signs. He sends his followers out to heal the sick and to proclaim God’s message of peace to each house they enter. This is evangelism, spreading peace and healing. It is work that shows the character of God. It is work that spreads the good news, that God is a God of love and compassion and that all people, no matter what their circumstances, are precious to God. It is work that provides a glimpse of the world as God intends it to be, a place where people know that everyone is a child of God and treat each other accordingly. A place where people speak words of peace and healing and welcome to one another.

Travel light when you go to proclaim this message of peace and healing. Leave behind the baggage of evangelism, Lucy-style. And don’t get weighed down by thinking too narrowly about what it means to be a healer. I wish Jesus had given his followers the power to cure cancer and other diseases today; but just because he didn’t, doesn’t mean we can’t be bearers of healing. I believe that one of the most destructive sicknesses of our times is that people don’t know they are precious to God. They don’t know they are loved. They haven’t heard God’s words, you are my good creation, I am pleased with you, I have a purpose for your life. Instead, they spend a lifetime paying attention to voices that tell them the opposite, that they are not good enough, that they will never measure up, that they are nobody.

I’ve been reading a book by Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest who has spent his entire twenty-year ministry working with murderous gangs in the inner city of Los Angeles. He founded an organization, Homeboy Industries, that provides jobs, job training, and mentoring for these young men and women. Most of all, what he tries to do is to show them unconditional love. He calls it modeling the “no matter whatness” of God, the God who never gives up on us, no matter what we do or how we mess up. He says, “The wrong idea has taken root in the world. And the

idea is this: there just might be lives out there that matter less than other lives... (we try to be) people who through their kindness, tenderness, and focused attentive love return folks to themselves... we don't hold the bar up and ask people to measure up to it. One simply shows up and commits to telling the truth. At Homeboy Industries, we seek to tell each person this truth: they are exactly what God had in mind when God made them—and then we watch... as people inhabit this truth. You need to dismantle shame and disgrace, coaxing out the truth in people who've grown comfortable believing its opposite." (*Tattoos on the Heart*, p. 192-3.)

This is the truth that we, as Christ's evangelists, are called to proclaim: God's message of love for all people in Jesus Christ. It's a message that all people need to hear. They hear it when we tell them, but perhaps even more, they hear it when we show them.

In his new book *Searching for God Knows What*, Donald Miller tells a story of helping a friend, a man I will call Bill, through the painful rigors of recovery from alcohol addiction. Bill said that a single incident had given him the strength to persist in the recovery process. His father had flown in from a distant city to attend a recovery meeting with him. At that meeting, Bill was asked to confess all his issues and weaknesses. When he finished, his father stood up and addressed the assembled group of addicts. He said, "I have never loved my son as much as I do at this moment. I love him. I want all of you to know I love him." Bill said at that moment, for the first time in his life, he was able to believe that God loved him, too. And he knew that if he had the love of God and the love of his family, he could fight his addiction. That's when he started to believe he might make it. Bill saw the kingdom of God was near.

One of the ways we show people that the kingdom of God is near is by showing them we love them, and showing them that God loves them. Not because they've earned it with their pleasing personalities and responsible lifestyles; what distinguishes God's love from human love is that God is absolutely uninterested in who deserves to be loved. As long as we think of God's love as something a person has to earn and deserve, we'll be stuck in judgment and criticism as our dominant mode of encountering others.

You can travel light when the purpose of your journey is to show love to people. You don't need a seminary degree; you don't need a perfect score on some Bible trivia test. You do need to have accepted God's love yourself. You do need to realize that you didn't earn it, never could earn it, and yet it's yours forever. Then it's enough to speak honestly and truthfully about what the love of Jesus means in your own life.

We talked last week about the baggage of rejection and how the fear of it can hold us back from sharing the good news of Christ's love and inviting others to experience it. This morning Jesus emphasizes again that rejection comes with the territory when we follow him and we're not to let it get to us. Keep in mind, it's the kingdom of God we're inviting people into, not the kingdom of me. If Vernon Church is a place where the nearness of God's kingdom can be seen and experienced, I guarantee you that people will want to be here. And if some don't, well, others will.

When we leave here today, a lot of us will be going to parades and barbecues and fireworks displays. It's a good thing to take time to relax and rejoice in the blessing of living in this great country, and to celebrate our freedoms. But when the last brat is eaten, the last paper plate is

thrown away and the last glow of the fireworks has faded, I hope you will remember Who it is who has given us these gifts of country, of freedom, of prosperity; and yes, even in bad times we live in prosperity compared to most of the rest of the world. Remember that none of us earned the right to be born here in this land of freedom and abundance.

And so I hope when today's celebrations are over, we will go out with a disciple's commitment to live our lives in ways that show our gratitude and that glorify the giver. Travel light. Let go of the petty, trivial stuff, and focus on what's important.

Rejoice, as Jesus says, in what God has done for you. And then go out to be God's messengers of hope, and love, and peace, and healing.

Travel light, because the message is all you need.

Thanks be to God. Amen.