

## PACKING FOR THE TRIP

Scriptures: Mark 6:7-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Today's scripture raises some interesting questions about clergy compensation. Jesus sends his disciples out to preach, and he tells them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—a walking stick. No bread, no bag, no money in their belts—they are not even supposed to take an extra shirt. I'm glad Jesus is not on our Personnel Committee.

Of course, there is an interesting statement in verse 10. Jesus says to them, "Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place." In other words, Jesus wants the disciples to live with a family in the community where they are preaching and to stay with that family the whole time. I am wondering which of you would have offered your house to me and my family for the last 20 years.

Even in the first century, these instructions caused certain problems. There is an early Christian writing called the *Didache*, which means "teaching," that gives instructions about Christian missionaries. It says, "Let every Apostle who comes to you be received as the Lord, but let him not stay more than one day, or if need be a second as well; but if he stays three days, he is a false prophet" (Donald Juel, *Mark*, p. 94). My credibility ran out a long time ago.

You can see the problems these instructions could have created. On the one hand they may have discouraged people from going into ministry, especially people with families. On the other hand, they may have encouraged people to become missionaries so they could freeload off of people. To avoid this, the *Didache* says, "A traveling missionary who has no trade by which to earn a living should be avoided" (James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 182).

The apostle Paul was particularly sensitive to this. The book of Acts says that while Paul preached in Corinth he worked as a tentmaker. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes,

In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. ... What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

As a missionary Paul had a right to be provided with food and housing, but he chose instead to support himself with a job, so that no one could accuse him of being in it for the money.

The instructions Jesus gives in this scripture were just as awkward for Christians in the first century as they are for us. So what is Jesus really getting at? What is the issue with these strange instructions?

The issue, I believe, is not poverty. Jesus is not out to make his followers into beggars. The issue is *mobility*. Did you notice the two things Jesus allowed the disciples to take? Sandals and a staff! Shoes and a walking stick! The idea is to be mobile, to keep going.

Last summer my wife and I made our first trip to Europe, along with Jaime and Ann Seaburg. Each of us packed everything we took on that trip into a backpack the size of a carry-on bag. It had to be carry-on size, because we did not want to check any luggage. If you check a bag, you have to stay on the same plane as your bag, and there is always a chance that your bag won't make the connection. So we kept our bags with us on every leg of the flight, so we were ready for any missed connection or change of flights. It also meant that our bags did not have to catch up with us when we were moving from city to city. And we used back packs or shoulder packs so that we could move around cities on public transportation and walk distances on old city streets without dragging a suitcase on rollers over cobblestone. Europe has not yet heard of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

To do this we had to leave a lot of stuff behind. I took one pair of shoes that I wore the whole time. It was almost Biblical. I took three shirts. Jesus only allowed one, but I took three, along with two pants, three pair of underwear and three pairs of socks. They were quick dry and I washed them in a sink every other night. It was interesting to discover how little we could live with for two weeks. We did it, not to make some point about a simplified lifestyle but in order to be nimble tourists—travelers who could move easily from place to place without getting bogged down with a lot of baggage.

That, I believe, is the key to this scripture passage. Jesus wants the disciples to be nimble evangelists—people who can get out there and reach people and touch people without getting bogged down with a lot of baggage.

Which brings me to our church. The Presbyterian Church has been called a lot of things, but nimble is not one of them. There is a lot that we have to do around here just to maintain ourselves. We have to heat this place and clean it and repair it. We have to administer personnel policies, including benefits. We have to maintain communication so that people know what is going on, and we have to schedule the use of rooms so that we are not stepping on each other. All of which requires a budget that must be administered and accounting practices that must be observed. We are a long ways from those first disciples that were sent out with shoes and a walking stick.

But I think Jesus still has something to say to us in this scripture passage. What he says is “Don't get bogged down with baggage and forget your mission.” The point is for us to get out there and reach people and touch people with the message of God's Kingdom.

There is nothing wrong with having a building. Maybe in Palestine you could get away with nothing warmer than a single shirt, but I would hate to try it here. In Spokane in January a building is a good thing to have. But we must be clear. The building is not something we build and maintain for its own sake. It has no meaning or purpose except as a tool to reach people and touch people in the name of Christ.

That's why I like how to see how much our building is used. If you have never been here on a Wednesday night, you should see this place. Twenty or thirty young children are here for FISH club, along with a dozen or so parents and leaders. Another twenty or thirty older children are here for KICK, along with teachers, music leaders, or kitchen helpers. All of these kids eat

and play games in the fellowship hall, and then occupy various classrooms around the church. At the same time the junior high youth are meeting down in the youth room, and the adults are having a Bible study in Room 4 right across from a roomful of children in the nursery. Meanwhile there is a church service in the sanctuary with about 50 people, including a half dozen or more children who come up for the Junior Sermon and then go out for Kids Zone. I don't even know where they go. I've been afraid to ask.

A building can actually be nimble when it is used like we use our building. This is especially true during Vacation Bible School. During Bible School we set up tents in the courtyard and out on the lawn in order to add more classroom space. That is what you call a nimble building. The point is to have a building that can help us do what Jesus sent his disciples out to do: to reach people and touch people with God's healing, transforming grace.

The same is true with budgets and committees and all the other structures of our church. There is nothing wrong with committees. Even Jesus did not send his disciples out alone. By the way, the reason Jesus sent out his disciples by twos was partly for protection, but partly because Jewish law required that the testimony of a witness at a trial had to be confirmed by at least one other witness. The second witness was a check to make sure that the first witness was truthful and accurate. Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs so that the witness of one disciple could be corroborated by the other disciple. Committees, in a sense, have the same purpose: to make sure that we are not deceiving ourselves, to help see things more clearly and make better decisions than we would make if we were on our own. Sessions and boards of deacons and committees can be good things as long as their focus remains on the people we are trying to reach with some good news.

The same things apply to our personal lives. I don't take from this scripture passage that Jesus wants us all to have only one pair of shoes or one shirt. That might work for two weeks in Europe, but not year round in Spokane. Jesus does not mean we should be throwing away our wallets or our purses or our boots. He does mean, however, that we should be thinking less about what we can acquire and more about whom we can serve. The truth is that we could all probably get by with a few less shoes, a few less shirts, and a lot less baggage. The question we should ask is what do we need to have in order to do our mission? The next time you go shopping ask that question: What do I need to have in order to do my mission in life? What do I need to have in order to touch people with the healing, transforming grace of God's Son? Invest in those things, and you are investing in the Kingdom of God.

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