

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

Ezekiel 2:1-5

Mark 6:1-13

July 5, 2015

TRAVELING LIGHT

The family and I had a bit of vacation this past week. We traveled to be with family in Richmond and to have some time with our daughter who is working in a camp in West Virginia this summer. We drew up a list and packed for the variety of expected experiences, with clothes to go to church and to go swimming and for some occasions in-between. We took books even if we wouldn't get to them. We took our cell phones, even though they didn't always have cell service when we were in the mountains. We took and pretty much filled up the car that we take on trips. We had made arrangements to stay with family in one place and at a hotel in another. We took money and credit cards with us to cover our needs along the way. We didn't want to forget anything we might need. Just in terms of shoes, I took church shoes, casual shoes, sneakers, flip flops, and water shoes. We were ready for a variety of situations. We did not travel particularly light.

I don't normally report these kinds of things to you about our family's vacation times, but what we packed was in contrast with what we hear Jesus tell his followers to take with them on their trip. Now they were going not on a vacation trip, but a mission trip. Take your sandals, the clothes on your back, and your walking stick, he told them. Don't worry about taking food or money or extra clothes. That was it! If very many people today followed Jesus' instructions to his followers, bellhops would be out of business. Of course, the particulars of travel, communication, and accommodations today are much different than they were two thousand years ago. In a much different context for ministry, it may not make sense to literally follow Jesus' instructions to travel that lightly when we go out in serving our Lord. But his instructions prompt us to ask what is essential and what can be left behind when we are sent out for ministry in Jesus' name?

The first thing we notice is that his followers are sent out. He had been involved in his ministry and they had been observing what he did. But here Jesus shows that part of following him involves being sent out by him to extend his ministry. They go out for a while and they come back. They don't just stay to themselves focusing on their own needs all of the time. They are sent to proclaim God's goodness through word and deed. When they go, Jesus gives them a very short packing list. He is not advocating an ascetic or extremely austere lifestyle for his followers, but there seems to be some urgency to their mission. He does not want them to spend up their time gathering ahead of time everything they might need along the way. He can tell them to pack lightly because God could be trusted to be going along with them to provide for their needs. Part of the goodness about God that they would be proclaiming had to do with God's providential nature. At a time when there was not a prevalence of hotels, there was a system of hospitality expected for travelers. Those who were open to receiving people who were sharing the gospel message and the healing it brought would be used by God to provide for the needs of those who had been sent. The hosting of the messengers would also allow those who received them to see a bare-bones authenticity - that these people weren't just preaching about trusting God, they were living out their trust in God.

Those who were being sent would also be traveling light because if they took with them all of the luxuries of the time, it would be difficult to reflect the compassion for those in need that was a core component of Jesus' ministry. There was a news story that came out about a month ago of a mega-church pastor who has proclaimed that he needs the top of the line luxury private jet, one that costs 65 million dollars, in order for him to travel to carry out the proclamation of the gospel. ¹ I wonder just how many people seeking food would need to be turned away in order to pay for that. I don't quite see how that follows Jesus' packing list.

We are told that Jesus sent them out two by two. From the start, the aggrandizement of any individual was unneeded baggage for such a mission. Ministry was to be a team sport, with individuals using their God-given gifts in mutual cooperation with others for the benefit of all. Each member of the team could give feedback and encouragement to the other. Glorifying the individual messenger was not what ministry was to be about.

Not everyone would be receptive to the message they were carrying. Jesus found that himself, as we heard description of a time when his ministry was rejected, particularly in his hometown. In that situation, it seemed to be that someone whom they had seen growing up in their midst could not then be understood as a person who was coming from God. At other times for Jesus, the reason he was rejected was because of his message about the radical inclusivity of God's love. Yet, he did not whittle down the message so it would be accepted by all. Several years ago, a toy company launched a marketing campaign for a new doll. It was a Christ-child doll, marketed as an unbreakable, washable, nine-inch model of the baby Jesus. Unfortunately, it was not a hot seller, and stores ended up with a lot of extra dolls left sitting on their shelves. And so the retailers decided to reduce the price to try to clear their excess inventory. One newspaper flier advertisement read, "Jesus Marked Down 50%!" Jesus marked down by 50%. From the time when Jesus was first rejected by his hometown folks, up until this very day, there are those who have been trying to mark Jesus down. That is to say, people have been trying to cut Jesus down to a size with which they are more comfortable.² But Jesus did not alter his message that the love of God was for them and for all people.

When crowds or individuals were unreceptive, Jesus did not force his teachings upon them. He did not exercise all the powers of his ministry where there was little openness to it. And he told his followers to peacefully leave those who were not receptive to their ministry. The messengers were responsible for their obedience to the mission, not for the numbers who would respond positively. They did not need to demonize those who rejected their message. Animosity toward those who were unreceptive to their efforts would be a heavy item to be carrying around and this was another reason for them to be traveling light. They could go on to others who might be more open to their message and ministry.

Now why would they go? Why would we? It has to do with something that Jesus always carried with him to be shared with others. It actually lightened the load for the journey and defined the content and style of ministry. Do you know what I'm talking about – the love of God. It is the motivation and the core of the message that sends us out in Jesus' name. There are a lot of things we can do without when we are sent out to join in our Lord's ministry. But whatever you take with you, for God's sake, and for the integrity of the gospel, don't forget to take the love of God with you to sustain you and to be shared.

¹<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/06/03/pastor-creflo-dollar-might-get-his-65-million-private-jet-after-all/>

² From a sermon by Rev. Stephen Wilkins, "Who's Your Lord?" Georgetown Presbyterian Church, July 15, 2012. <http://www.gtpres.org/120715.pdf>