

Traveling Light

Susan Mazzara

Butner Presbyterian Church

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Gospel Lesson: Mark 6:7-13

[Jesus] called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Wow! Little did I know that I grew up getting a first-rate spiritual education! But after reading today's gospel lesson, I realize that's exactly what I got! You see, when it came to traveling, my parents were free spirits. Come vacation time, they would pack up the car, load us three kids in the back seat, and just set out on the road with no more specific destination in mind than, say, "Garden City, SC" or "Indian Rocks Beach, FL." But seldom did they plan anything more specific than that, including where to stay. As Mama describes it, they didn't see any need to make hotel or campsite reservations. They'd just find a place to stay once we got there! While this generally worked out OK if we were going someplace familiar, like Garden City, it did backfire a couple of times. Once in Nashville, for example, we drove past "No Vacancy" signs for what seemed like hours until we kids ended up sleeping in cots in a conference room. Another time, we parked our camper in some kind stranger's back yard because the camp-ground was booked solid.

As an adult, I am lucky enough to be married to a man who loves to plan vacations. And I mean REALLY plan them! When we went on a driving tour of Arizona in the early 2000s, Chris made a booklet with all of our driving routes, all of our hotel reservations, and all of our pre-paid admission tickets lined up in chronological order. If we're on page 7, then it must be June 22, and we must be in the Petrified Forest! It still gives me great comfort to know I never again have to be that sleepy little curly-headed girl wondering if there's a bed waiting for me somewhere!

So, I admit that it distresses me a little that Jesus sends his twelve disciples out on a preaching tour with instructions to take little with them and to make few plans. Could it actually be true that my devil-may-care parents were onto something? Even if it sounds like a haphazard way to set out on a journey, his instructions do give us wisdom for setting out as a church to carry the gospel into the world.

"[Jesus] called the twelve and began to send them out two by two." Service to the gospel of Jesus Christ is never solitary. We are church in community. In fact, we serve a God who exists in the community of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The communal nature of the church assures us that we are never alone in our faith journeys. We go in the company of brothers and sisters and walk in the footsteps of a great company of witnesses who have gone on before us. We don't ever have to make up our proclamation or figure out how to do be church on our own. But we are guided by millennia of tradition.

The communal nature of the church also calls us to be on the lookout for and to be hospitable to others who are alone. If it is true that we never step out of these church doors alone to go in service

to the world, it is also true that no one that we meet outside of these doors needs to be alone. We go out to befriend and companion those whom we serve.

And [he] gave them authority over the unclean spirits. We never set out by our own authority, but only by the authority of Christ and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In Matthew, Jesus' last words to his disciples are: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* If it's true that we do not have to proclaim the gospel alone, it is also true that we must not proclaim the gospel alone. We need each other not only for strength and courage and mutual support, but for correction and accountability and mutual enlightenment. We best see God and discern God's call to us in concert with other Christians.

And the fact that Jesus gave his disciples authority specifically over unclean spirits is a good reminder that we are called to a ministry of healing and wholeness. We are called to a ministry that is in keeping with the generative forces of this world, the forces of creativity, life, and growth. Jesus does not give his disciples authority over the people to whom they minister, but only over the degenerative forces of this world, the forces of destruction, death, and decay. We are called to build up, not to tear down.

He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.

A staff, sandals, and one tunic. These are the only things the disciples were allowed to take with them. It calls to mind the Israelites as they ate their Passover meal with their sandals on their feet, and their staff in their hand. Just as the Israelites were about to embark on a journey in which they were radically dependent on God, so are we called to radical dependence on God. Jesus sends his disciples out with nothing so that they have to depend on God for everything. Taking nothing but a staff and sandals makes God's servants adaptable, flexible, and available for service.

When we are serving folks who do not know where their next meal is coming from, and we expose ourselves to a bit of uncertainty in our own lives, we are better able to serve without judgment or condemnation. It helps us identify with those whom we serve and opens us up to the possibility that they can serve us also.

In the ancient world, to have the opportunity to serve one who serves God or to support one who walks a spiritual path was a great privilege. In his life of the Buddha, Thich Nhat Hanh describes in almost majestic terms the dignity of the first Buddhist monks as they walked through town with their begging bowls. People came out of their houses and bowed to the monks out of respect for their spiritual path. The Buddha taught that begging for food was important because it allowed others serve him. He recognized that not everyone was free to walk a spiritual path. Receiving service from others in a humble manner clears a path for them that they can walk. Receiving service from others requires that we put aside our pride and self-sufficiency. It saves us from an attitude of patronage. It helps us recognize that others are on a spiritual path that, while different from ours, is every bit as honorable and dignified.

I wonder if taking nothing for their journey but a staff was also a protective measure. A staff can be not only a support, but also a means of defense. And walking their paths with no bag, no money belt, and no extra clothing would have been another means of warding off bandits. In calling them to leave their possessions behind when they go on a missionary journey, I don't think Jesus means to

make his disciples vulnerable. I think he means to make them free: free from the worry of possessions, free from judgment, free from pride, free from injury.

Interestingly, Paul reads this instruction as a right, and not as an obligation: “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 to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have any one deprive me of my ground for boasting.” Paul exercised his proclamation of the gospel as a tent-maker. Wherever he went, he supported himself by sewing tents. Although he had the right to be supported by the churches he planted, he never exercised that right. This gave him a radical freedom to proclaim the gospel as he understood it without having to fear economic backlash. For Paul, provision of economic support would have meant deprivation of theological freedom. So even though Paul does not go out in poverty as the disciples do, he does go out in freedom.

[Jesus] said to [the twelve], "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place." The gospel is not a tool for bettering our social or economic position. Jesus wanted his disciples to refrain from looking around for better accommodations. They were to go into a town and accept the hospitality of whoever offered it. Once they accepted it, they were to refrain from looking for or even being open to a better opportunity.

A friend of mine who is now a retired Presbyterian minister once told me of a time when he was searching for a new call. He felt that he had accomplished what he had been called to do at his present church, and it was time to move on. As he was discerning between two churches, he knew that one was wealthier and could offer him a higher salary. But he also felt that the poorer church was the one to which God was calling him. With an offering in hand from the poorer church, he received in the mail what he knew would be an offering from the wealthier church. So before even opening that letter, he wrote to the poorer church to accept their call. I so admire this man and this story because it embodies the spirituality that Jesus is teaching. We go where we believe Jesus is sending us, not where we think we can get a better deal.

I think this teaching has implications even for folks who are not engaged in ministry as a profession. I think it has implications for how we relate to our faith communities, especially when things don't go our way. Because we serve God in community, it is a guarantee that not everything will go our way. Sometimes churches or the councils that govern them make decisions that we disapprove of. But as long as those decisions do not hinder our calling, as long as we can still serve God in the context of that community, we stick with it. We don't go looking for a more accommodating church.

This teaching requires us to be humble in our ministry. It requires us to acknowledge that our faith community, and the faith that is expressed in that community is much bigger than we are. The faith expressed by our church might not coincide exactly with our own faith, but that's OK. We can still serve there. We don't go "trading up" where ministry is concerned.

"If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." The gesture of shaking the dust off of your clothes or your shoes was a gesture of contempt, a kind of curse. It was a gesture that meant something along the lines of "I'm done with this town. Let them rot in their own filth." But I don't believe in curses, and I don't believe that just because I've failed to connect to persuade with someone, that does not mean that God is done with them. I'm not that powerful, and God is not that dismissive. Maybe a more modern reading of this old gesture is to not concern ourselves with outcomes, to not be attached to a specific outcomes. I'm a Stephen Minister, someone who is trained to provide confidential, Christ-centered care to folks who are suffering. Stephen Ministers have a saying: "We

are the caregivers. God is the cure-giver.” When we go about ministry in a way that is process-oriented rather than goal-oriented, we acknowledge that the work of bringing about healing and wholeness is God’s work. And who knows? If someone seems unreceptive or unresponsive maybe God is still at work there.

So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

We go out as a community to proclaim the gospel on the authority of Christ, in keeping with God’s life-giving purposes, and in radical freedom and humility, trusting that the outcome is in God’s hands, not ours. Whether we proclaim the gospel through preaching or teaching or sharing a meal or building a house or holding a hand or supporting the education of a young girl in Guatemala, we never know what God might do with our proclamation, what aspect of it is going to be meaningful or effective, or what fruit it might bear years from now. The mystery of the gospel is part of its excitement.

We do not know where God might send us. All we know right now is that God is sending us there together. God is sending us with the promise of Christ’s presence and authority. God is asking us to leave the outcome to God. Come! Put on your walking shoes. Take up your staff. Leave everything else behind. We’re traveling light!