

“TO PACK OR NOT TO PACK?”  
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Mark 6:1-13

It's vacation time! School's out, summer has begun, and over the course of the next couple of months, many of us will be taking vacation. Why, just yesterday, as soon as Vacation Bible School ended, a couple of our families took off – one for Disney World and another for Alaska!

Well, if you've ever gone away, you know that one of the tasks you have to tackle is packing for the trip, and if you're like me, it's probably not something to which you look forward! What to pack, how much to pack, how much does the suitcase weigh, will I have room in it for souvenirs on the way back, and so on!

Has anybody here ever packed too much for a trip? Anybody here ever had an argument with a spouse about packing too much for a trip? I remember hearing a suggestion once that you should pack your suitcase for a trip and then take out half of the stuff you've packed – and you'll still be all right. Sadly, I've never tried that.

I'm more like the person who described herself as a “defensive packer.” That's a packer who packs for every weather eventuality – sweaters in case it gets cold, short sleeves in case it gets hot, an umbrella in case it rains, gloves in case it snows – you get the idea – and what you get is a really overstuffed suitcase!

Going on a journey – that's the subject too of today's Gospel lesson that you just heard – actually there are two journeys in the lesson. In one, Jesus journeys to his home town of Nazareth, and the other journey is when he sends his disciples out two by two. And for that particular journey, Jesus gives them instructions on how to pack.

But let's look at his journey first. As you heard, it was pretty rough. Oh, it started out well enough. You see, before he got there, in the days before, Jesus had done some pretty incredible things – he stilled the storm on the water, he healed the woman who had been sick for years and years, he brought back to life one of the synagogue leaders – Jairus' daughter. So word had spread far and wide of the mighty deeds he had done, and now he lands back in his hometown of Nazareth.

A crowd gathers to hear him, but after listening they begin to ask questions, like, “Isn't this the carpenter who grew up here, isn't this Mary's son, isn't this the brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters right here with us?” So filled with questioning were they, that they couldn't believe he was the Messiah,

and Jesus was filled with sadness over it, and moved on to other towns and villages. It was not the greatest homecoming ever!

So now, Jesus is about to send his disciples out in ministry, on this journey for him. And he wants them to be prepared, so he lays out some instructions. He tells them, “take a walking stick, but don’t take food or luggage or money.” He told them to receive the kindness of strangers, stay in homes that would welcome them. Then, of course, having just experienced rejection himself, he told them how to deal with rejection, if it came their way – to shake the dust off their feet and move on.

Now imagine being told to take off on a journey with basically nothing. How would you feel? I know how I’d feel – helpless, scared, vulnerable. What he asked of them was pretty radical, but you know what, I think what he was telling them was that all that stuff would weigh them down and block them from fully relying on God.

What would they need God for if they had all the food they needed, all the clothing they might need, all the hotels in which they could find comfortable rest simply by paying a few coins? I really think Jesus was saying, “let go of all that stuff, and let God lead you, trust in God to lead you, trust in God to give you everything you need. Make this journey with open arms and you’ll grow closer to God along the way, because it’s just you and him!”

My friends, you and I are Jesus’ followers today, and we too are called to journey with him and for him, making disciples along the way. Can you imagine the conversation he would have with us today? “Leave behind your smartphones, your iPads and iPods. No GPS, no hotel reservations, no 360-degree spinning luggage, no Vera Bradley duffle bags – nothing!” Could we do it?

Could we, can we, go out into the world to tell others about him, without anything, simply relying on him to do that? It’s a daunting prospect, isn’t it, but it can also be an exciting adventure and a statement of our trust and faith in him, when we do.

But before we can even do that, before we can go and speak a word for Jesus, we need to be in relationship with him ourselves, and that’s a whole other journey – a whole other journey that can be blocked, again, by too much stuff. One pastor talked about this when she wrote:

“I wonder sometimes just what all of my ‘luggage’ or my ‘baggage’ gets in the way of me experiencing:

- As I turn my attention to guard my belongings, how am I less able to reach out with a gesture of kindness to another?
- As I rely on my own careful planning for every eventuality, how am I less open to what God may have waiting for me?
- If I already have everything I need, how am I less able to receive the gifts of those I meet along the way?” (On-line, “Traveling Light,” Janet Hunt)

Oh my, does she hit the nail on the head! All of our luggage, our baggage, can surely get in the way of our relationship with Jesus and with other people. So the question each of us needs to consider today is: “What extra baggage are you carrying around that’s getting in the way, that’s pulling you away from Jesus, and others, and that’s keeping you from fully relying on God?”

Is it your need to be in total control, your need to call all the shots, organize everything, schedule everything, leave nothing to chance?

Is it your past? Is your past looming so large in your life that you can’t let Jesus in – past sins, past arguments or grudges that you won’t let go?

Is it your ego or pride? Are they so strong, that you can’t be humble before the Lord? Are they so strong that you feel like you are fine just the way you are, so you really don’t need Jesus so much?

Or maybe, on the flip side, maybe your baggage that’s keeping you away from Jesus is your insecurity – you’re just not sure you’re worthy of his love.

I can tell you, that sometimes, your baggage is *literally* your stuff, your possessions. You get so wrapped up in them, or getting more of them, or maintaining all of the stuff that you have, that Jesus gets pushed out of the way. I can tell you a little bit about that myself.

Some of you know that one whole week of my renewal leave – seven long days – was spent doing what I called “purging the parsonage” – that is, getting rid of stuff. And I mean, I got rid of a whole lot of stuff – I think my neighbors probably thought I was moving. I threw out forty bags of stuff in the trash, and it wasn’t all trash – it was things like my seminary class notes from 30 years ago, and twenty-nine years worth of sermon notes. I made eight trips to Goodwill to donate things like extra kitchen appliances, pots and pans, stereos, televisions, extra sheets and towels, you name it. And AmVets actually brought a truck to take a huge load too.

It was a huge project, an exhausting project, but I want to tell you I had to do it. For years, I felt my life was cluttered because my house and my office were cluttered. It was always there, gnawing away at me, but it became so overwhelming that I could never face tackling it. And you know what, having too much stuff, and having the clutter of it hanging over you, steals time away from your relationship with Jesus. It just does. I can’t tell you how wonderful it feels to have taken care of that, how freeing it is, what a load it has taken off.

We, in this country, have so much stuff, more than most of us will ever need, and sometimes, it gets in the way of our relationship with Jesus and

with others. If we have all that we need on our own, like that pastor said, how will we ever open ourselves to gifts from God and gifts from others?

My friends, what is it that you need to leave behind in order to draw closer to Jesus? Whatever it is – pride, possessions, control, unworthiness – whatever it is – Jesus invites you, like he invited his disciples on that day so long ago – Jesus invites you, to lay it down, leave it behind, and fully rely on God to give you what you need and lead you where you need to go.

So let me finish by telling you about some who did just that. One was actually a church, that I learned about from Pastor Anthony Robinson. He visited this particular church one day. He had long known about it, for it had once been what we call a “cathedral church” – a leading church in its denomination, known for great preaching and great social action. But over the years, like many churches, it had declined.

Pastor Robinson got to the church a little early, and was met by an officer of the church. Since they had a little time, the man offered to give the pastor a tour of the facilities. As they walked around, the man admitted to Pastor Robinson that twenty years earlier he wouldn't have bet two nickels that that church would still be around. At that time, there were just fifty elderly people left worshipping in that great sanctuary.

But then, he said, something happened. They experienced a renewal, a revival of sorts. These days there are four or five hundred people in worship, and they have new ministries in the community, and regularly welcome new people – young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight.

“Well,” Pastor Robinson asked, “what happened? How do you explain it?”

The officer said, “Well, it wasn't all our new minister, but he has made a difference. He got us studying the Bible, and in fact, he can give you the entire message of the Bible in just six words.”

Intrigued, Robinson asked, “And what might those words be?”

“The six words that summarize the Bible? I am God and you're not.” He said, “I know, it sounds kind of silly, but I don't think it is. It's not about us, it's about God.”

That once great church had become so focused on its past glories and singular prominence that they had forgotten the real source of the church's power and life – the power of the living God. Their pride and ego had gotten in the way.

But humbled now by this new pastor, they laid them aside and called afresh on God to do a new thing, to draw them close, to renew them, to give them what they needed, and to lead them where he wanted them to go – and

they've experienced new life, and lives are being touched and changed and brought closer to Jesus Christ every single day. An entire church gave up its baggage and traveled light into a new future relaying solely on God, and trusting him all the way, and incredible things are happening there!

It was a radical change, a new life – not unlike the radical change and new life that came for a woman whose name we have all heard – Maya Angelou – the late, great poet. You may have heard her story before, but for those who haven't – when Maya was in college, she was, in her own words, “very erudite, very worldly.” She had it all together, or so she thought.

Until one day one of her teachers asked her to read aloud from a book called *Lessons in Truth*. So she started, and read through the section he had instructed her to read which ended with these words: “God loves me.” When she finished, she closed the book and looked at her teacher, who said, “Read it again.”

These are her words now: “I pointedly opened the book, and I sarcastically read, ‘God loves me.’ He said, ‘Again.’ After about the seventh repetition (Angelou writes), I began to sense that there might be truth in that statement, that there was a possibility that God really did love me. Me, Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all. I knew that if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things, I could try great things, learn anything, achieve anything. For who could stand against me with God?” (Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Anything for My Journey Now*, quoted in *Spiritual Literacy*, p. 466)

All that baggage she had been carrying around, her ego, her worldliness, was blocking Maya Angelou from knowing God, but when she finally laid it down, what glory came into her life. Jesus wants all of us to know that glory, that love, but we can't do it carrying all the stuff that gets in the way.

He invited the disciples to travel light, and he invites us to do that too. Travel light, trust in God, do not be afraid, for He is with you every step of your journey. Travel light, friends, travel light.

Amen.