



“Travel Light”

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***Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
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Luke 10:1–11, 16–20 (NRSV)***

Today’s gospel reading describes the commissioning of the seventy. This passage is what you might call “marching orders” for the first Christian disciples. Some modern approximations to Jesus’ charge to the seventy might include the following: a Presidential address given at a university commencement, a locker room pep talk given by a coach at the World Cup finals, or a commanding officer’s charge to military troops about to be deployed for battle.

These were serious words for critical times and they were uttered by a man who knew more about what his followers were headed into than they could have imagined themselves. Anyone listening to what Jesus said would have known that the mission before them was not for the faint of heart. Jesus said:

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road...

Hear the challenge?

The first words that come to mind, at least for me, are *caveat emptor* (buyer beware), not “Sign me up!”

According to Luke, these marching orders were given by Jesus at a time when he still walked the earth. But several scholars argue that this passage was most likely an extrapolation by Luke of the commissioning of the twelve, recast for his late first-century audience, to telegraph to apostles that life in the Christian community would not be a cake walk.¹

¹ Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Halladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1984) p. 327.

Luke's reference to "the seventy," like most numbers used in scripture, had a symbolic significance. Several scholars suggest that the number seventy may have been intended to correspond with the seventy nations referred to in Genesis 10, or the seventy elders who Moses appointed from the twelve tribes of Israel to serve as spiritual mentors to the masses.

In any case, the number seventy was symbolically significant in that it conveyed the idea that these people were part of a long line of faith leaders in the Judeo-Christian tradition whom God, through Christ, had imbued with spiritual authority to teach, preach, heal, and serve—not just among their own kith and kin, but to all the nations.²

Luke's use of the metaphorical term "harvest" is also packed with symbolic meaning. Here Luke draws on another Old Testament reference—this time from the prophet Isaiah, who described the harvest as the time when the Jewish Diaspora would be reunited from the ends of the earth. The metaphor of the harvest, in the commissioning of the seventy, then, refers to the mission to unify the believers, rather than to point to the Judgment Day as some modern preachers have presumed.

Some specific tactics for fostering Christian unity are set on the lips of Jesus by Luke, where Jesus says essentially, "Travel light. Accept the hospitality of those who receive you. Eat the food that is put in front of you, regardless of whether it's kosher or you know what it is. Heal the sick. Preach the kingdom. And, if a person or a city won't receive you, leave the judgment to me."

II

I think that most of us know that the things in life that are worth doing usually aren't easy to complete. They are often fraught with challenge. So we are not surprised or easily daunted by Jesus' words. Still, it is not easy for us to heartily embrace the mission to which Jesus called the seventy—and by extension—the mission to which he has called us.

Why is that? Why do we resist the commissioning?

I suspect that we resist the commissioning for reasons similar to Jesus' and Luke's contemporaries.³ I suspect that we resist because we have a lot of baggage.

Some of the baggage that weighs us down is the physical stuff that we are attached to, i.e., our earthly possessions. For most adults the physical things that hold us back are things like home mortgages, auto loans, or other kinds of consumer debt or school debt incurred for ourselves or our children.

²See Ex. 24:1, 9; Num. 11:16, 15; 32, 29-40. David L. Tide, footnotes, Gospel of Luke in the *Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), p. 1978, and Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Halladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1984) p. 327.

³Note, Luke's gospel was associated with a diverse faith community that lived a generation after Jesus.

Preparing for vacations can expose other baggage that may literally hold us back from accepting our commissioning. The next time you throw your suitcase on the bed to pack for vacation, ask yourself as I did last night, “What is it that I won’t leave home without?” Is it my VISA card, my laptop, my cell phone, an extensive wardrobe, or some work project that didn’t get completed before I left the office?”

Then hearken back to Jesus’ words, “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals...” Instead of thinking what do I need to pack, reverse the question, and ask yourself, “What can I leave behind?”

The airline carriers have our number, don’t they? They are making a lot of money on our baggage. Last night, I did a comparison of fees charged by the major US carriers and learned that the average rate per bag is about \$25 for the first bag, and \$30 for the second bag. Extra charges apply for oversized luggage and luggage that weighs 50 to 100 lbs. Bags that weigh more than 100 lbs. have to be shipped separately as cargo.⁴

Maybe you don’t like the extra costs associated with your baggage, so you say, “No problem, I’ll fly JetBlue or Southwest, where bags fly free.”

Such an approach may save us a few bucks, but it won’t unfetter us from the physical things that bog us down or keep us from reaching out to grasp a new opportunity that God has set before us.

III

Some of us are bogged down by physical accoutrements or the pursuit of possessions, but that is not all. The things that bog down or hold back many of us are, more often than not, things that we might call “emotional” or “spiritual baggage.” These forms of baggage may have to do with unresolved issues from our families of origin, previous relationships in our adulthood, or our religious experiences (or the lack thereof) in childhood. Regardless of the nature or the origins, emotional and spiritual baggage is that stuff that we haven’t yet acknowledged or figured out how to manage in an easier way or to successfully lay it down.

Think for a moment about the emotional baggage that you may be carrying with you these days. What’s in those bags? What’s weighing you down? What are you holding on to, so that you are not yet able to reach out and receive or grasp the new opportunities that God has set before you?

No doubt, many of us have or continue to harbor wounds from childhood or from a past relationship that went sour. We may know that something went wrong, but haven’t yet been willing or able to go back and take a look at the incidences or dynamics in the relationship, to understand and work through them, or to change the behaviors that contributed to them, so we continue to harbor hurt, repeat dysfunctional patterns of

⁴ <http://www.airfarewatchdog.com/blog/3801089/airline-baggage-fees-chart-updated/>

behavior, suffer from these wounds, or worse yet—compound our sense of woundedness.

As a pastor, I find that most people have a pretty good idea of what physical baggage bogs them down. Most of us are challenged by travel plans, a family move, or a financial crisis to re-examine the influences of our consumer culture on us, and to make different choices about simplifying our lives.

But managing more successfully with our emotional baggage requires effort too, and often comes as a result of a crisis. Resources such as talk therapy, twelve-step groups, and self-help literature have helped many people take important steps on the journey toward healthier emotional lives. I recommend them all to you, and encourage you to find ways to work through your emotional baggage, to leave behind what you can, and to learn ways of holding that which you aren't yet able to lay down or perhaps cannot let go of this side of heaven.

IV

Spiritual baggage can be even more challenging than physical and emotional baggage for some of us. My guess is that this is because the resources that we need to cope more successfully with spiritual baggage are not readily available in the larger culture, and most religions and religious leaders would rather that we not unpack those bags. Because, well, the stuff inside is messy, and unpacking can lead to some unorthodox behavior. Some notable examples of spiritual baggage follow:

- Those of us who grew up in religious traditions that emphasized the authority of ordained leaders over the laity may have trouble trusting that we have been called through the water of our baptism to the Christian ministry. We may have trouble trusting that we do *not* need a priest or pastor to say our prayers for us, or to mediate our relationship with God; and that we can go straight to the top, or bottom, or wherever we sense the spiritual location of God to be.
- Those of us who grew up in religious traditions that did *not* recognize the leadership of women, or that did *not* encourage planned parenting, or that did *not* promote mutuality and equality in marriage may have some spiritual baggage to work through in order to fully claim our power to lead, to choose, and to share in decision-making—not only in the church, but in our homes and communities.
- Those of us who grew up in religious traditions that taught that only so-called nuclear families were the norm may have some spiritual baggage to work through in order to trust in our heart-of-hearts that who we are and the families we have forged are equal in the eyes of God.
- Those of us who grew up in religious traditions that required us to align our beliefs with a specific set of church doctrines may find ourselves both delighted and perplexed by the challenge to sort through our suitcases and decide what

we're taking with us for the next leg of our journeys, what we're leaving behind, and what we may need to gather for the road ahead.

Whatever our situation, the baggage that is holding us down or keeping us from reaching out to grasp a new opportunity that God has in store for us can be set down—as Jesus says and Luke reminds us. It can be set down, re-evaluated, and even left behind.

V

Think about your life for a moment. Consider your journey and what you're carrying with you right now—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

- 1) *What's your final destination? How many bags are you checking through?* Do you really need to take with you all that you are carrying right now? What do you really need to take with you in order to get to your final destination? Note that what was helpful in the past may not be helpful in the future.
- 2) *Is there anything toxic or flammable in your bags?* Not everything in this life was meant to be taken on the road or in the air. Some of the most dangerous stuff we can take with us on the journey through life is unresolved emotional and spiritual baggage. Perhaps now is the time to find a spiritual director or therapist or a good friend with a cup of tea and start sorting through our baggage, identify the most toxic stuff, and find ways to park it or neutralize its potency, so that we can enjoy greater health in the future.
- 3) *Do you have identification on your luggage?* As the signs we see in many airport baggage claims say, "Many bags look the same. Please check to make sure you have your own belongings." In short, claim your own stuff, and don't accept any items offered to you by a stranger—or maybe especially someone who is not a stranger. Here again, working with a spiritual director or a therapist or even a good friend can help us recognize and claim the baggage that is ours and that which belongs to others, and help us take appropriate responsibility only for that which belongs to us.

So here we are—about to depart for another leg on the journey of life. Please remember to look around you and to make sure that your bags are properly stowed, and that your tray tables and seat backs are in their locked and upright positions. Most of all, remember to travel light, and be sure to go with a companion or two or seventy. Amen.