

## Traveling Light

Luke 10:1-12

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“Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). According to the Gospel of Matthew, these are the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples. We call this “The Great Commission.” Jesus is sending his followers out to the ends of the earth to share the good news of the gospel. They are noble words, words that have touched many people and inspired them to undertake the great missionary endeavor.

In this passage we have just read from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is also sending out disciples to spread the gospel. But in this passage, rather than the inspiring words of the Great Commission, Jesus is a little more realistic. Here Jesus admits that the calling to spread the gospel is not always going to be easy. Here he says, “I’m sending you like lambs into the midst of wolves.” And then he warns them that they will probably go to some places where they will not be welcomed. In these verses, Jesus prepares his disciples for the challenges and possible rejection that will face them as they share the good news of the gospel.

You might think that with all the challenges they are going to encounter, Jesus would stock them up with all the supplies they will need to get by: “You’ll need some of this and some of that, just in case.”

But No. Perhaps the most surprising part of the instructions that Jesus gives to these missionaries is what he tells them NOT to take with them. Don’t take a purse, no bag, no sandals. They are really supposed to travel light. I don’t know about you, but when I go away from home for even one night, I take all kinds of stuff with me. I don’t want to forget my vitamin pills or my deodorant; I have to take my cell phone charger, things like that. You know how it is. I’m not very good at traveling light.

Barbara Kingsolver’s wonderful novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, tells about a missionary family, the Prices, who go to the mission field in what was then called the Belgian Congo. It was the late 1950’s. The first part of the book is entitled, “The Things We Carried.” It’s told through the voice of one of the Price daughters. She says: “We came from Bethlehem, Georgia, bearing Betty Crocker cake mixes into the jungle. My sisters and I were all counting on having one birthday apiece during our twelve-month mission. ‘Heaven knows,’ our mother predicted, ‘they won’t have Betty Crocker in the Congo.’”

As they prepared to go, their mother laid out in the spare bedroom

all the worldly things she thought we’d need in the Congo just to scrape by. “The bare minimum for my children,” she’d declare under her breath. In addition to the cake mixes, she piled up a dozen cans of Underwood devalued him; Rachel’s ivory plastic hand mirror with powdered-wig ladies on the back; a stainless-steel

thimble; a good pair of scissors, a dozen number-2 pencils; a world of Band-Aids, Anacin, Absorbine Jr.; and a fever thermometer (p. 13).

In addition there was a cast-iron frying pan, ten packets of baker's yeast, pinking shears, and various other necessities.

I understand the need for every one of these things. I'm sure if this story were about me, I would have taken all that and much more.

But here is Jesus telling these ones that he is sending out to go empty handed—take nothing: no purse, no extra cloak, no extra sandals. Maybe it's because Jesus knew that if they were burdened down with all this stuff, they would be preoccupied with the stuff and thus miss an opportunity to share the good news.

I remember hearing my Daddy say, "We are so encumbered by things." I think I know now what he meant—that things become a burden, and often get in the way of what is really important. Jesus doesn't want his missionaries to allow anything to keep them from their mission to tell the good news.

As Jesus is preparing his missionaries, he says to them, "You are to eat whatever is set before you." You know that much of the Old Testament law contains various dietary restrictions—what's OK to eat, and what you are not supposed to eat. Don't eat pork, for example—Deuteronomy 14:8. What they ate and what they did not eat was one of the dividing lines that separated the Jews from Gentiles. When you read about the early days of the Christian church in the book of Acts, you see how often conflicts arose about food—what to eat and with whom they could eat.

But here Jesus is telling his missionaries to eat whatever is set before them. You can almost hear them gasp and say, "Well, I'm certainly not going to eat this; I'm not going to partake of that." But Jesus knew that these restrictions would place barriers between them and the people they wanted to reach. And for Jesus, more important than some legalistic dietary restriction was the person with whom the gospel was being shared. It's like Jesus is saying: "Don't let anything keep you from sharing the gospel with those you meet."

As you read on in the story of the Price family and their mission to the Belgian Congo, you realize that all these material things that they were carrying—the Betty Crocker cake mixes and the Absorbine, Jr. and the rest—these were really symbolic of other things they were carrying—their prejudices, their biases, their assumptions about the ignorant natives they would meet. And you very quickly come to realize that it is these things which were the real hurdles and stumbling blocks in their effectiveness as proclaimers of the good news.

Which makes me think: when I look at our congregation and how we are all so much alike, it makes me wonder if maybe we have somehow unwittingly communicated to people that unless you're like us, there's not a place for you here. I hope we're not doing that, but it's something we need to think about.

One interesting note here is that Jesus is sending out seventy followers. As is almost always the case in the Bible, the number—seventy—is not just a random number, but it has special significance. It refers to Genesis 10, where after the great flood which destroyed the world, from the descendants of Noah there were seventy nations that populated the whole world. The number seventy stood for all the nations of the world.

It's clear that Jesus is sending out his followers so that the good news will be taken to everyone. All are included; no one is to be left out.

Maybe one of the reasons missionaries have so often experienced rejection is that they have forgotten the good news they are to share. I think so often people going out in the name of Jesus tell the story wrong.

One of my favorite missionary stories comes from Annie Dillard's book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. The story is about a missionary who went to work among the Inuit people (the Eskimos). After working among them for awhile, an old Eskimo hunter converted, and became a Christian. Some time passed, and one day the Eskimo went to the missionary and asked, "If I did not know about God and sin, would I go to hell?" And the missionary answered, "Well, of course not; not if you did not know." The Eskimo said, "Well then why did you tell me?" (p. 124).

It's a good question. If telling people about God and sin puts their souls in danger of the fires of hell, then we're better off keeping it a secret. And frankly, if that's the only message we have, then it's not particularly good news, and I can see why people might reject it.

But that's not the message we have been given to share. We've been given a message that proclaims God's unconditional love and saving grace for all. A grace that forgives our sins, a love that redeems us, a Savior who opens the gates of heaven to all. And furthermore, we have a message that proclaims not just good news about the future, but that proclaims a joy for living this life right now, a message that lifts the burdens of life. And that is good news we have to share.

When Jesus sent out the seventy, he gave them no restrictions about who to talk to; Jesus wanted everyone to be able to hear the good news.

At first reading, Jesus appears to be sending his disciples out into the world empty-handed, but that's not really the case at all. Before he sends them out, he gives them everything they will need to do what he has called them to do: he gives them his Spirit; he tells them that God will be with them; he gives them the word of peace and good news that will bless people's lives.

Maybe that's the problem with all the things we carry: they keep us from seeing the real blessings that God has given to us.

I think you can sum up all these instructions by saying that Jesus is telling these followers to trust in God and to know that God will be with them. "Remember: I am with you always," Jesus said.

And that's Jesus' word to you and me as well.

Thanks be to God.✠