

# **"Travel Lightly"**

## **Sermon on Sunday, July 7, 2019**

Based on Luke 10

It's travel season. Lots of people are rolling suitcases into airports and standing in long lines. For those of us who have been traveling through the air in recent times, we have heard the slogan, "Travel lightly." We know the temptation of bringing too much, transporting more than we really need and paying for it, literally. Funny, it's always harder to pack less than it is to pack more, isn't it? Oh, and by the way, it's a spiritual truth as well. Blessed are those who travel lightly through life!

In today's gospel, Jesus gives his disciples travel instructions. He is sending them to the beach towns of Lake Galilee to proclaim the gospel, seventy of them, in pairs of two, thirty-five small mission teams. We can sum up Jesus' philosophy in one short slogan: "Less is more, guys!" The disciples are supposed to keep their luggage to an absolute minimum, to a point that offends modern sensibilities regarding hygiene and dress code: no extra shirt, no extra bag, no gifts. Translated into the vernacular of our time that also means: no I-phones with blog accounts and Face Book pages, no I-pods with your own individual selection of music, no ear phones to escape into your own world, no gadgets. Once you translate this passage into the travel culture of our time, you start wondering how long it would take Jesus to find seventy Christians willing to comply with those restrictions. Are there any? And he doesn't even explain the purpose behind the rules. If I imposed such travel restrictions on my kids when we go on vacation, I would never hear the end of it, "Why can't we have...? Why can't we bring...?" and soon our car looks like a moving truck. But to be perfectly honest, I would be just as uncomfortable without my own little comforts. And yes, I like an extra shirt or two. And an extra book or two. And, God forbid, if I forget the I-phone charger...

Barbara Brown Taylor, a long time Episcopal priest, teacher and speaker, shared in one of her books the story of her husband visiting a Lakota tribe for some sort of alternative spiritual journey. Up in Lakota country, her husband Ed was asked to fast for almost an entire week, sit in the sun, stay out in the elements of the Great Plains and meditate. When he came back home, his skin looked leathery, his face and neck were sun beaten, he was quite a bit thinner, and he had a big smile on his face. Still beaming, he said to his pastor wife, "You guys in church make it way too easy for your people!" He was right. For us to worship we need air conditioning, we need heat, we need whichever comfort we have gotten used to. Which makes me think of a deeper truth behind it all...

Sometimes as a church we travel with too much baggage in this world: the baggage of our own outsized expectations, the baggage of the right theology that is never quite right if we're honest, the baggage of what people who go to church are supposed to be like or not be like (how foolish is that!), the baggage of our history and living up to it, the baggage of trying to be "spiritual." In this passage Jesus is asking us to lighten up, literally lighten up, let go, and let God worry about the gravity of it all. Can we do that? Can we try that?

When I first thought about this text and also about our theme for this Sunday, I thought Jesus is asking his disciples to be different. Certainly, by the customs of their time and even more so by the social expectations of our time they would stick out. But it's not about being different for the sake of being different; it's not about a new shtick. What he is asking them/us to do is really about practicing faith and learning to live with less. Maybe that's one of the hardest lessons of faith for people like us. We have too much. We bring too much. We need too much. We are all pretty much in the same boat, and our boat is sinking because we have exceeded the weight limits, and God is asking us to dump some stuff in order to live!

Father Gerard Sloyan, a well-known Roman Catholic theologian, a parish priest in Trenton and great public speaker in his day (Father Sloyan will turn 100 in December), once reflected on the advice of Jesus to travel light. This is what he wrote in his frank and honest way: "I have never found any virtue in traveling light ... At my first eight-day retreat, I arrived with three suitcases, a yoga mat, two six packs of sparkling water and appropriate crafts spilling out of tote bags -- in case the meditation points were not sufficiently compelling. My director happened to be walking by the registration desk when I brought in the last load. "This is all you have?" he asked. Father Sloyan nodded. "Well," he said, "I can see we have a lot of work to do on trust."

"The following year," Sloyan remembers, "I returned as a director myself -- one suitcase lighter but still heavily laden and still sheepish. That evening, my first retreatant said to me, "I am beginning to learn that my relationship with God is not a matter of doing things... it is a matter of undoing." Father Sloyan listened like pastors sometimes listen when people utter a truth that is meant for them. He took a huge step forward in his spiritual development. He left the sparkling water at home the next year.

Change is difficult! Giving up things is hard! Now, if I asked you to take an inventory of your own home and to make a list of all the things that are superfluous, things that you haven't touched in years, and if, as a church we piled up all of our extra belongings, how big a pile would that be? Bigger than this church, probably. Of course, I need to hear this as much as anyone. Most of us are junkies of "stuff." I am reminded of the great scene in one of my favorite movies, "A River runs through it," when Norman Mc Lean's father, a Presbyterian minister, teaches his son a lesson in writing by asking him three times to go back to his room, rewrite the text, make it shorter, because shorter is better. Each time, the boy returns, hopeful to meet the expectations of the family patriarch and after three times of purging the text to its bare essentials, he is finally released to go out and play in the open. I wish John Updyke had had a teacher like that. We all need a teacher like that...

Talk about spirituality as something we learn by way of reduction, not addition: keeping our minds free for God, our hearts unburdened from too much stuff. And by this I explicitly don't mean things that you truly love and treasure; I mean things that you only possess but would hardly miss if they weren't there. If we learn how to undo our dependence on things, appreciating fewer things more deeply, appreciating people more deeply, we will stick out in this culture of ours. We will be different in a good way, less stressed and maybe, dare I say the big word, - free! And isn't that the goal? **Amen.**