

Unfortunately, when Jesus sends us out to be his people in the world, and tells us to rely on him and thus take nothing with us, we can't help but take along who we actually are, including the "baggage" we normally carry. And by baggage, we mean something other than suitcases or parcels. That word is shorthand for burdensome personal history we drag with us that interferes with our living fully in the present.

This baggage could be nonproductive ways of dealing with conflict, inappropriate responses that are triggered at inopportune moments, unaddressed fears from childhood, psychological damage from abuse, frightening ideas about God - in fact, just about any holdover from our past that prevents us from getting on well in our relationships or with our daily responsibilities.

In fact, sometimes, such baggage gets so heavy that we need counseling or psychological help to unload it. And that's hard, because we may have cloaked ourselves so heavily in counterproductive attire that we'd feel naked if we really stripped it off.

The problem of baggage. Probably most of us have some kind of baggage that travels with us even when we think we've taken nothing for the journey. But there are a couple of helpful things we can note from this account of Jesus sending out the Twelve:

First, while he tells them to take nothing for the journey, he never tells them to go buck naked. They are to be vulnerable, but not *that* vulnerable. They took their shortcomings, their scarred psyches and their damaged emotions with them, and *they were still able to do the work to which Jesus called them*. They still cast out demons and healed the sick.

And second, they were working for the Divine Healer. Matthew says, after reporting a day when Jesus cast out spirits and healed the sick, that what Jesus had done *was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases'* (8:17). Note the word "infirmities." Since it's included in an account of Jesus healing several people, we might assume that "infirmities" is simply a synonym for "illnesses" or "diseases," but, in fact, there are two activities named: healing (or bearing our diseases) and casting out spirits (taking our infirmities).

The fact is, in the Bible, the meaning of the word "infirmity" or "weakness" seems to range from our sins, on the one hand, to our illnesses, on the other. It's reasonable to conclude that

infirmities can include emotional baggage. And for that kind of load, the Scripture suggests that what's needed is neither forgiveness nor medicine, but divine healing.

We Christians, who know the vocabulary of righteousness, may be tempted to label some of our hang-ups as sins. Some can be, but don't be too quick to go there. The person who has too high an opinion of himself may be guilty of the sin of pride, but the one who flaunts his abilities may not be proud at all. He may have such low self-esteem that his apparent pride is actually an attempt to hide how worthless he feels. What he suffers from is not sin, but baggage. And what he needs is not forgiveness, but healing.

Christians who suffer from persistent guilt may naturally conclude that they have some unconfessed sin in their lives. That could be the case, but it's also possible that those feelings of guilt may simply arise from the fact that their parents were severe and judgmental people, or that they grew up hearing a lot of hellfire-and-damnation preaching.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his listeners not to be anxious about their lives, what they would eat, drink or wear. He went on to point out that, instead of worrying, we should trust God to care for us, and seek God's kingdom. Since Jesus said those things, some Christians have concluded that worry and anxiety must therefore be sinful. But that's not what Jesus said. He said, "Don't be anxious," but he never said that the person is lost. The tendency to worry about everything doesn't mean we're not faithful followers of Christ. It may mean, however, that we have baggage.

What can we do about our baggage? Here are some things that might be helpful in dealing with our infirmities. They might even help us leave some baggage behind:

- Ask God to help us face our problems squarely and without rationalization. Admit to God the specific reaction that interferes with our relationships and keeps us from doing well.

- Take a look at those whom we blame for certain of our hang-ups, and decide what we need to do to keep those memories from poisoning us today.

- Accept the responsibility for who we are today. In terms of understanding where our various complexes originate, it may be helpful, briefly, to look at what circumstances in our past have contributed to the shaping of our present personalities. But it's far more important to say, "Regardless of how I got where I am, I am responsible for dealing with it now and for working

to become the whole person God intended me to be." That may even mean ignoring certain gut reactions, and behaving, instead, in ways that are more adult.

- Lay the problem before God. Counseling, support groups or psychiatry are appropriate and important first steps for baggage handling, but talking to God about the scars we bear is also a vital part of the healing process.

Let Jesus handle the baggage. Did you know that churches can carry spiritual baggage too? Very often, it's a big old steamer trunk labeled "tradition." Tradition in the church is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it's a marvelous source of stability and connectedness with the past. There's nothing like a classic hymn that has stood the test of time, or the immortal words of institution from the Lord's Supper. Yet, on the other hand, tradition can get in the way of adapting ourselves to the demands of mission to a rapidly-changing world.

During the French and Indian War, some British officers traveled through America's north country, followed by wagon-loads of luxury items like fine china and wooden furniture. That was the way officers traveled along the paved roads of Europe – but, along the Indian trails of upstate New York and Canada, this sort of baggage was ludicrous.

Traveling light on the journey of Christian discipleship sometimes requires us to leave certain beloved, but cumbersome, traditions behind. Traveling light on the journey of Christian discipleship sometimes requires us to jettison the emotional baggage that holds us back from doing great things for God. Traveling light on the journey of Christian discipleship sometimes requires being open to the divine healing offered through Jesus Christ. There are times when Jesus' instruction to take nothing with us ought to be obeyed almost literally; but the instruction to travel light is also an invitation to leave our baggage behind.

Prayer: God, just as You called King David so long ago, so You call each one of us to speak and act on Your behalf in our world today. Forgive us when we are hesitant to follow: when we question Your call or make excuses for our abilities; when we complain about our lack of time or hoard our resources. Give us courage to step out in faith, to go where you send us without hesitation or fear, trusting that Your presence goes with us, and that You will provide all that we need. Amen.

Take Nothing for the Journey

Sunday, July 12, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Mark 6:1-13

It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone today that you can't put guns, knives, crossbows, meat cleavers, box cutters, mace or similar items in your carry-on luggage and expect to be allowed to board an airliner.

But what's the problem with mascara, toothpaste, mouthwash, hair gel, yogurt, chocolate pudding or such in your bag? A few personal care items are permitted in very small amounts and packed a special way, but not the other stuff in any quantity. Explosives can be disguised to look like those innocent products, so we have to either leave them at home or put them in our checked bags.

Actually, the TSA (Transportation Security Administration) would be happier if we all took nothing more than the clothes on our backs for our journeys by plane, but generally, that's not practical.

Still, that's essentially what Jesus told his disciples when he sent them out in pairs to cast out demons, heal the sick and call people to repentance. "Take nothing for the journey," he told them. Actually, according to Mark, Jesus did allow them to take a staff and wear sandals, and of course, the clothes they were wearing. But Jesus, like the TSA, had a list of *prohibited* items: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts and no second tunic.

Jesus had a reason for the items he banned: They could undermine the mission on which he was sending his disciples. They were to depend on God to provide for them through the hospitality of strangers. How they traveled and were welcomed was to be itself a demonstration of God's care.