

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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July 7, 2019

Travelling Light (adapted from 2016.07.03)

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. – Luke 10:1-12

In a week's time, I am going on a family rafting trip on the Nahanni River. We start by driving North for two days, making our way to Fort Simpson, the colonial name for the place referred to by the indigenous Dene as "the place the rivers come together," as it is there that the Liard River empties into the mighty Mackenzie. From Fort Simpson, we board a couple of float planes and fly up the Liard and Nahanni until we get to a wide spot on the river above Virginia Falls where we can land. There we unload, and start to portage everything to the base of Virginia Falls. And then, for the next week, we will be entirely dependent on what we load on the float planes and unload again.

We have to pack carefully: we need to make sure we leave nothing essential behind, but at the same time, we don't want to lug around anything extravagant or unnecessary. We have to err on the side of safety; the weather might be warm and sunny, or it might be wet and cold – we hope we don't get snow, but it is possible that far North, even in July. What to take and what to leave behind is a very serious, and important question. We have online lists, and Skype conversations about those lists. Our goal is to be self-sufficient, so that we get down the river, through the week, without freezing, starving, needing to be rescued, or worse.

I am starting to pack, and thinking about what I really, really need, what I just want, and what I can do without. My hiking and camping gear is spread out in the basement, and I am making piles of the essential and the questionable. I want to travel light, but not too light. And as I pack, I am remembering that how light we travel is not just a practical question, but also a spiritual question.

Once, three decades ago, Therese and I took a drive South along the coast of Washington state. One of the places we wanted to see wasn't on the itinerary of most

tourists. It was a protest camp called the Ground Zero Centre for Non-Violent Action, located on the edge of the Trident nuclear submarine base on Puget Sound in northern Washington. There an eclectic group of peace activists had gathered to non-violently protest the insanity of a world which devoted so many resources to vessels of war, while so many human needs went unmet. The base serves the American navy's Pacific fleet of Trident submarines, each of which carries 24 ballistic missiles, and each missile can launch eight warheads, enough to devastate a sizable portion of the globe. Ground Zero was named for the fact that the base would be right at the top of Soviet priorities for its own arsenal of nuclear weapons; it would be Ground Zero in case of a nuclear war. Symbolically, it stands for every place, since none of us would escape the aftereffects of such an exchange of weapons.

Some of the protestors had been there for ten years by the time we visited, and some came and went. The Ground Zero Centre for non-violent action is still there, and you can visit their website if you are interested. Many of the long-term protestors were Christians, when we visited, and some were of no particular faith. But the ones I remember were the Buddhist monks, three of them, both women and men. I remember them vividly, not because of their saffron robes or shaved heads, but because of their radical vulnerability. They travelled lighter than I can imagine. They had no possessions, none beyond the robes on their backs. For food, they survived each day on the generosity of those they encountered. In their detachment from material possessions, they sought to achieve enlightenment. In Buddhist countries, monks go around each day and receive gifts from the people in the community, but in northern Washington, they were strange, and therefore even more vulnerable than in a community where people understood the expectations. They were certainly strange to me.

I think of those Buddhist monks now when I read this passage of Scripture in which Jesus sends out seventy of his followers to teach and heal in his name. They are to take nothing, no bag or purse, no backpack, tent or freeze-dried food. They are to travel light. They are to be completely dependent on the hospitality of strangers. They are to be vulnerable, and that vulnerability will be a blessing to those who respond with generosity and a curse to those who don't.

I admit that I really struggle with this teaching. I am often irritated by those who come knocking on my door asking for my generosity. I don't like my television show

interrupted by the middle class kids doing bottle drives to raise money for their sports teams. I am even more irritated by the vagrants whose only interest in the church is when they need a handout. But none of these are really what Jesus is talking about.

In the ancient world, there were other itinerant preachers. The Cynic philosophers, for example, prided themselves on their independence and unconventionality, like modern ultralight backpackers. They took a bag, sandals and a purse, but they travelled light. They intentionally rejected material possessions and a conventional life and lived on the streets. Self-sufficiency was their goal.

In contrast, Jesus sent his followers out, with instructions that seem intentionally to offer an alternative to Cynic philosophy: no bag, no purse. They also are to travel light, so light that they cannot possibly be independent or self-sufficient. They are forced to find people who will be generous. They will depend on the kindness of strangers, but they are not to be parasites, simply taking without giving. In their practice of healing and teaching, they will give back to the community that is generous with them and that community will be richly rewarded. The relationship will be neither dependent nor independent, but interdependent, a mutually beneficial exchange of generosity. In their interdependence, they will help to shape a community of generosity and grace, and that community will bring the kingdom of God near.

Aside from those brief periods of my life when I am living out of a backpack, I do not travel light. I have a house and many possessions. And it is easy to look to those possessions as security, but that is an illusion. The teachings of Jesus, the practice of Buddhist monks and Cynic philosophers all testify to the truth that we cannot seek our security through our possessions, from the effort to be independent. Our security does not come from being independent, but from being part of an interdependent community of grace.

A ten year old film has stayed with me for its insights into this theme. In the film *Up in the Air*, an itinerant Ryan Bingham, played by George Clooney, also travels light. His work takes him from city to city so frequently that when a pilot on one of these flights asks him where he is from, the only answer he can come up with is "Here." His life is spent up in the air. At the beginning of the film, he likes it that way. He is living his dream. He relishes travelling light. Everything he needs he fits into a bag that he can carry on to a plane. He even delivers motivational speeches about the virtues of

living without the burdens of things. “What’s in your backpack?” he asks the audiences of his motivational speeches.

But he also believes in living free of relationships. People are also burdens, in his way of seeing the world. Through the course of the film he comes to realize that without friends or community, he is both rootless and aimless. And at the end, as he stands in an airport terminal, looking at a display of upcoming departures, there is a deep sadness about this man who has realized for the first time just how lonely his life is.

Jesus calls us to travel light, not so that we can be free of relationships, but so that we can be available for relationship and community. The Beatles once sang, “All you need is love,” which at one level is sentimental nonsense. However, at a deeper level, there is a great truth there, the truth that all we need is the love found in a community of generosity.

The picture book that I shared with the children, *The Next Place*, is about travelling light, about what is really important. It concludes with these lines:

I will travel empty-handed. There is not a single thing
I have collected in my life that I would ever want to bring
Except... the love of those who loved me,
and the warmth of those who cared.
The happiness and memories and magic that we shared...
I will cherish all the friendship I was fortunate to find,
All the love and all the laughter in the place I leave behind.
All these good things will go with me.
They will make my spirit glow.
And that light will shine forever in the next place that I go.

Wherever you live, however you live, whatever your possessions or lack of possessions, if you lack that kind of community you are poor; if you enjoy it, you are possessed of a priceless treasure. While there are times when I feel burdened by my possessions, I also feel blessed by many friendships, a community of generosity that has made my life rich and full. I am grateful. I am blessed.

I leave you with two questions: “What does it mean for you to travel light? What does it mean for you to be available for community?”