

“Take Nothing on Your Journey”

A Reflection for Morning Worship on the Star Words: *Endurance & Commitment*
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, February 20, 2022

Text: Luke 9:1-11

So, here’s my question as we get started this morning – and I am so excited to be able to ask it of actual people!!! Progress! When you are packing for a trip, how much stuff do you bring along? Are you a small carry-on person, easily able to fit two weeks’ worth of clothes into one of those teeny suitcases designed to fit underneath an airline seat? Are you a small carry-on and a regular size suitcase person who’s not afraid to check a bag on an airline or lug an extra suitcase into wherever you are staying? Or are you a backpack, two suitcases, a shoe bag and a cosmetics bag kind of person? *(pause)*

I ask because this issue of how much luggage per person is too much is one which surfaces whenever we travel in my family. It doesn’t matter if it’s a vacation trip for all three of us or if Peter and I are going away for a weekend, or if I am traveling by myself. How much is too much stuff to bring along always comes up. And I admit I am at the center of this controversy. My family likes to make fun of me because I do have somewhat of a slight tendency to overpack, just a tad. I can’t help it. I never know what I might feel like wearing wherever I am going. And I like to have choices. I can’t just plan out my wardrobe ahead of time. I don’t know what the weather will be like because those long range forecasts aren’t always accurate! I don’t know if I will be feeling too warm or too cold. And, if we’re going someplace new, I don’t know if I’ll need dressier clothes for dinners out. And what if we decide to go to church? I can’t wear just anything to someone else’s church!

Of course, with my emerging foot issue I won't be needing the shoe bag anymore – and I did love the shoe bag. Oh well....

Perhaps now that I have shared with you my tendency to overpack, occasionally, you can understand why these words Jesus spoke to the disciples – “take nothing for your journey” are to me the most challenging, even frightening, words Jesus ever spoke. In these five words Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter of confronting what the UCC statement of faith calls “the cost and joy of discipleship.” In these five words, Jesus lays out just what is at stake in making the commitment to discipleship, the commitment to following Jesus, a commitment to live, intentionally and deliberately, with Jesus' Great Commandment as the only guardrails of one's life. In these five words Jesus is challenging the disciples, and us, to put our stuff where our words are and do what it takes “to love God with all that we are and all that we have and to love the other as much as we love ourselves.” Holy cow, now that is one heck of an ask.

Of course, this concept of leaving everything behind in order to devote one's life totally to following Jesus is why members of Catholic religious orders take a vow of poverty. Before entering an order, they give away all their stuff – clothes, furniture, family heirloom jewelry, beloved pets, etc., etc. – because the stuff is seen as an impediment to full commitment to the life of total discipleship the religious order requires. This is an extreme interpretation of this text to be sure, or so it seems to us. We who love all our stuff shudder at the thought of just walking away from it as the disciples did when they set out to practice the kind of ministry Jesus was teaching them. Surely Jesus doesn't ask us to give up everything we love – people, stuff, places – does he? Well,

this is the question the followers of Jesus have struggled with since he first gave these rather specific instructions to the disciples two millennia ago. And this notion of money and stuff being a barrier, an impediment, to the full development of one's faith keeps recurring in the Gospels, the Acts and the Epistles over and over again. Judas sold out Jesus to the authorities for 30 pieces of silver. In Acts, Luke tells us about Ananias and his wife Sapphira who sell some property but fail to give it all to the early church to which they belonged. Instead, they held just a little back – for a rainy day perhaps? But, when this understandable human desire to hold on to just a little was discovered by Peter, then the leader of the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, Ananias was struck down dead. Shortly after, Sapphira also died when confronted by the lies they had told about how much the property sold for. Hmmm. Once again, the desire for stuff seems to be a huge sin here, a huge barrier to living a Christian life as it were.

Fast forward two thousand years to the modern day USA where something called the “prosperity gospel” has surface once again. Otherwise known as the “health and wealth” gospel¹, this particular ideation of the Christian Gospels has one simple message – if one has enough faith, then one's health will improve and one's personal wealth will increase. In other words, the depth of your faith is immediately visible in how healthy you are and how much money and stuff you possess. Totally at odds with today's text from Luke, right? Well, not according to some pretty well known tele-evangelists of today – like Oral Roberts, Kenneth Copeland, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Benny Hind, Pat

¹ Joe Carter, “What You Should Know about the Prosperity Gospel” May 3, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-you-should-know-about-the-prosperity-gospel/>

Robertson, and most recently, Joel Osteen and Paula White. These folks have essentially found a way to commodify the Christian Gospel, to reduce Jesus' message to a quid pro quo transaction. Wow. And yet I understand why this message touches so many hearts. It takes the Gospel of Jesus and twists it into a magic formula for curing what ails you, including a perpetually empty bank account. If your health doesn't improve, you're not praying hard enough. If you still don't have enough money, you're not trusting Jesus enough. But, "just send us a check and we'll pray with you" so we can be sure God hears you and all will soon improve is the tele-evangelists' siren song. Sigh. Surely, God is unhappy with these folks for turning Jesus into a personal money making enterprise for themselves. Surely God's heart is breaking over such rampant and shameless greed.

But, back to us, right here on this February morning in a church on the coast of New England. What does today's text from Luke about "take nothing with you" really say to us? How are we not to see this text as an impossible standard we can never hope to achieve? We all love our stuff, for goodness sake! It's our stuff! This is hopeless! We can't possibly do this! For crying out loud, even the pastor is a chronic over-packer! What hope could there be for me? Well, first of all, we have to read beyond this one phrase in the text. We have to look beyond the "take nothing with you" and the list which follows it to see Jesus' point with this training exercise for the disciples. And that's what it was – a training exercise.

Jesus wants them to understand the price – there's that cost and joy of discipleship thing again – of devoting their lives to him, and to God. Jesus knew what he was asking of the disciples would

take not only commitment, but also endurance. He knew that the ability to live the commitment to follow him, the disciples would also have to be able to endure tremendous hardships. He knew friends and family would turn their backs on them, throwing up their hands in despair at what these fools were doing. That kind of criticism is hard to take for anyone. Jesus also knew that they would need to develop thick skins in order to endure the rejection sure to come their way as they undertook this training mission. “Whenever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” People don’t like what you have to say? That’s fine, Jesus says. Just leave and shake the dust off your feet so they know you want no part of them to move forward with you.

So, the disciples did as Jesus asked, and they headed off on their training mission. I am thinking they had to be at least a little worried. I mean they had nothing with them, nothing to fall back on if no one welcomed them, gave them something to eat or a place to stay. But then this amazing thing happened. It worked. The text tells us, “they departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.” Well, what do you think about that? They trusted Jesus enough to do as he asked, and it worked. They entrusted their entire well-being into God’s hands, and it worked. Their respective journeys were successful beyond anything they dreamed possible. So successful in fact that King Herod – yes, that King Herod – heard about it and was completely confused. How could this be happening he wondered. He had killed John the Baptist hadn’t he? Why was this kind of thing still happening? Hmmm.

In verse 10, it becomes clear that this whole missionary journey was in fact a training exercise, because they all return to Jesus, full of stories about everything they had done. Jesus welcomed them back and we can just imagine him sitting there smiling as they told him about all the people they met, all the homes where they were welcomed, all the people they had cured, all the lessons they had taught. This story ends with the entire group going with Jesus to Bethsaida for a little rest. But that didn't last long because people soon figured out where they were and came to find them. But this time, Jesus took over once again as "he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured." This time it was the disciples watching and listening, with big smiles on their faces, because they got it. They understood in a whole new way what faith can accomplish when bolstered by commitment to God and the willingness to endure whatever comes. And because they understood, because they lived the commitment they professed, because they endured – we are here today, in this little church by the sea in New England. Imagine that. What one does truly can make a difference!

The disciples kept their commitment to Jesus, even when he asked the impossible of them. They endured when they weren't sure they could. At the end they returned to him completely changed and ready for what Jesus already knew they would face after his death. But what of us? What is Jesus asking of us in this story? Are we being asked to "take nothing with you" as we make this journey through life, guided by this amorphous faith as our lifeline? Perhaps, but I don't think so. Not really. Jesus was a realist after all. What he wanted the disciples – and us – to learn

through this experience of taking nothing along was a simple one – no matter how bad things get, trust God. No matter how dark the days, no matter the seemingly insurmountable problems you face, trust God. No matter what comes your way, none of it – NONE OF IT – can keep God’s love from surrounding you, wrapping around you like a cocoon and guiding you through that desolate moment to the safety in God awaiting at the end of it. Jesus was teaching the disciples and us that, in the final analysis, stuff is just stuff. It can bring momentary joy to our lives and that’s okay. Joy is good. What isn’t good is when the joy stuff brings drives God away as the guardrail of your life. What isn’t good is believing that stuff or money or whatever can bring you lasting happiness, because it can’t. Not ever.

Commitment to living as Jesus asks us to every day by loving God with all that we are and all that we have, and loving the other as much as we love ourselves – that’s what the Christian life is. Enduring in that commitment even though we usually fall short of loving God as we’d like and with loving other people who continually disappoint us – even then – no – especially then – we are learning the most valuable lesson of all. No matter what we do or don’t do, no matter how often we screw up or fall short of whatever it is we believe God is asking of us in the moment – God still loves us! Jesus still walks with us every day. The Holy Spirit remains ever ready to empower our desire to endure in this commitment to following Jesus. So, will you? Dear ones, that is totally up to you . Amen.