

Light Packing

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: Luke 10:4 “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals....” ~Jesus

I have traveled more in the last three years than I have in my life. Almost every week I am gone for a day or two in the service of the Navy and our country. And you know what? Not many of my fellow travelers know what to make of Jesus’ advice: “*Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals....*”¹ Judging by what I see, we carry far more than we can manage. The airlines must have tired of it because first they restricted what we could carry aboard planes and in the last few months have also charged for each suitcase or duffle we check. Yet nothing seems to diminish the amount we travelers pack. These little wheels on suitcases—so very handy—have emboldened people to bring even more things on their trips.

And it’s not just the extra weight we pack: some of our fellow travelers seem bulkier than they used to be. Last January, I made a plane switch in Houston to catch a small regional jet to fly over to Pensacola. You know these planes—maybe holding 35 or 40 people. I bent my head down to walk the aisle to my seat. On this plane, every bag had to be checked. There was no room inside, not much even for the passengers. I was one of the first aboard, and I was calmly reading something before takeoff. The fellow who sat down next to me was large, very large. I noted others coming aboard in the half interested way one looks at fellow passengers in airports and on planes. Suddenly I realized there were a large number, almost all of us aboard were seriously *grande*. Moreover, many of them seemed to know one another. I asked the fellow next to me who they all were. “We’re a semi-pro football team from Pensacola. We’ve just been to the play offs in San Diego and are on our way home. Since they were joking about the size of the plane and everything else, I joined in. I told them just before liftoff I was going to yell jump. We’d all get airborne ourselves and that way the plane could get into the air. This caused a howl of laughter from my 400-to-500-pound fellow travelers. All I could think of was that probably my one bag of luggage wouldn’t be coming along with us. Sure enough when we landed the flight attendant announced no luggage had been loaded in Houston. We were instructed to go to the customer service desk to file claims and to make arrangements for our luggage when the next plane came from Houston. I found out that would be the following afternoon, after the luncheon speech the admiral had to give. I spoke in *mufti*. These things happen.

Newark Liberty is the embarkation point for many, many people. Most of us seem to think we need several suitcases, a brief case, a purse, and several hanger bags. The fellow in the Transportation Safety queue two weeks ago emptied his very large brief case for the x-ray machine. He took out five (!) laptop computers. At the luggage kiosk when you land, I’m always stunned by how many large suitcases small people have to retrieve. How do they manage if the

¹ Luke 10:4.

escalator is not working? And then there are the skis, golf clubs, guitars, and shopping bags. Why do we haul so much around?

Quite early in the gospel record, Jesus dispatched seventy of his followers to go out in pairs for him. These were advance people because, Luke said, he dispatched them “to every town and place where [Jesus] himself intended to go.”² He warned these seventy disciples that not everyone would welcome them or their message. One of the oddest things he told them was what not to take. “*Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals....*” Traveling light is good advice. Jesus and his twelve were on the road constantly so they understood the virtue of packing only minimal necessities. But it is odd to me that he mentioned this in the story. Why tell us that he told them to pack light? Is it an unnecessary detail or does it symbolize something important for us to know?

The Gospel is many things, but it is certainly a message we are commissioned to communicate. It is very easy to assume mistakenly the message is merely a set of words. For the Gospel to be winningly communicated to another person, you have to risk yourself. Part of its power is when the grace of God speaks through human personality and life. Just as the human Jesus incarnated God, so we his messengers incarnate Jesus. If you are more concerned about communication technique, the exact wording, and such, the Gospel gets obscured. At worst it becomes lost in delivery. Three comments, which, I hope, will open up what Jesus’ packing instructions might mean for us:

1. The preacher and his notes. Every preacher has a style and a way he or she speaks on Sunday. Some of us write out the sermon entirely in a manuscript. Some take the whole document into the pulpit and read it. Others make a few notes and only have that in the pulpit. Still others memorize the whole thing and go without any notes. I remember when word processing became common and my scribbled and scratched sermon manuscripts started looking better than they sounded! Though easier to read, I began to find myself more interested in my notes than the congregation. When the paper becomes more fascinating than what you are trying to teach—than getting through to your congregation—the preacher has a serious problem.
2. About five years ago a group of church leaders were trying to convince you in the congregation to vote for something. I forget what it was. But I was keen on getting a *Power-Point* presentation together for the congregational meeting. Bob Hayes was skeptical. He said, “When a salesman uses too many of these moving doo-dads and graphs in a presentation, I always think he’s trying to cover up for not having anything to say or a faulty argument.” Well, I can’t remember if we did a *Power-Point*, but I have done many in the Navy during the last decade or so. I had to work on my skills with this software to teach and speak, especially after I became an admiral. Try as I might, especially if someone else put it together, I have never been comfortable with the medium. I seem to become fascinated with the technology and what I can do, rather than what I need to communicate. About a year ago I began to suspect that writing a presentation to be given with *Power-Point* behind me had a way of forcing the presentation into a certain form. I became increasingly uncomfortable with it. Were the

² Luke 10:1.

speeches mine or *Power-Point*'s? I read an article in the *Wall St. Journal* that confirmed my hunch. 'Speaking naked' was the new word for going with only yourself, sans *Power-Point*. You just go walk out without props or fancy visuals—with only your notes—and trust you'll say what needs to be said. I was nervous the first time, but I found without my focus or their focus on the slides on the screen, I watched their faces and got feedback from them and this helped me communicate with them, not the screen. What a concept!

3. Bob Walbridge was a deacon in the Boothbay Harbor church. He told me once about a trip he had made to Salt Lake City. While there he visited the Mormon's famous Temple. (After all, what else is there to do in Salt Lake City?) Well, the Mormons are quite convinced of the value of their religion and so they meet every visitor outside the Temple. They have a message to tell, but they don't gussy it up and make their testimonies too slick. They are, as we say, just folks. Walbridge said he was stunned how very persuasive they were. Part of their success is that they just told people who they are and why their belief is so valuable in their lives. They just tell the truth as they know it. Because the real folks come through, the power of their message does, too. There's a lesson for us in that.

Jesus sent out his people with his message, two by two. He told them, "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals...." I think he was talking about the same thing and perhaps if he sends us out today he might say, "Don't worry too much about having a carefully reasoned argument. Don't take *Power-Point* slides. Don't fret over-much about technique. Just be yourselves and tell them what God has done in your life." Luke tells us that when the seventy got back they enjoyed huge successes. "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!'"³ Their personal integrity—the grace of God perfectly embodied in human life—shone through loud and clear. They did well for Jesus.

Has anyone noticed our attendance has fallen off in the last couple of years at our church? Lots of people have theories about why. I wonder what Jesus asks us to do about it? Do you think he might encourage us to be advance people for him, just as he asked those seventy disciples in the first century? We get ourselves nervous about how to approach absent friends and what we might say. We try to make it too complicated. If we love our friends and neighbors and we have seen they've been absent from the church, what if we just went to them and said something like: "We've missed you at church. Why don't you come back again? We need you and you need the church."

Perhaps we're trying to pack too much for our mission trip. "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals...." It is time we got underway with his message.

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³ Luke 10:17.