

THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 9
July 4, 2010 C

I am grateful to Barbara E. Reid for her telling of the story she heard in a radio interview of a journalist who spent a year doing jobs most Americans won't do ("Laborers for the Harvest," AMERICA, June 21 -28, 2010).

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

This fourth of July weekend finds many people across the country on the road. It's where we find Naaman in the first reading and Jesus and his disciples in today's gospel: on the road. Naaman, the trusted general of the king of Aram takes his horses and chariots on the road to Israel in hope of a cure for his illness. And Jesus sends an additional seventy disciples on a mission to towns and villages he intends to visit on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus gives his disciples some clear instructions - instructions which perhaps sound rather impractical for us twenty-first century travelers.

The journey, not the destination, seems to be what matters. Jesus tells his disciples to travel lightly. Don't let your lives get so cluttered with 'stuff' that gets in the way of losing sight of your purpose and calling.

I've had a gem of a book for years I've read and reread and loaned to many people called Sabbath Keeping. Donna Schaper, the author, writes about the importance of de-cluttering our lives. "Sometimes we lose our way, we get buried in the clutter of the small and insignificant. Sometimes we have no spirit - or, in the Korean phrase, we lose our 'salt.' We play music without soul and keep appointments without spirit. Our lives become cluttered...Good things pile on top of good things, which pile on top of still more good things. We get cluttered by the good! We have a hard time remembering from whence our air, our breath, our buoyancy, our generosity comes."

So what do we twenty-first century disciples make of Jesus' instruction to "carry no purse, no bag, no sandals?" What would he say today? No wallet or credit card, no cell phone or ipod or blackberry! What does it mean for us to trust God like Jesus told his disciples to do? And how do we travel lightly in the spirit of the gospel mission as instruments of peace? It seems at times, harder than ever, to keep our focus on Jesus' mission.

Our lives can get so easily cluttered with excess baggage we really don't need. It's not the stuff we pack in the car or the baggage we check at the airport when we travel that Jesus is talking about when he instructs his disciples to travel lightly. No, it's the baggage we carry within us that trips us up, oftentimes diminishing our capacity to be instruments of God's peace and heralds of the kingdom of God, or said another way, to

be “healthy emotionally, physically and spiritually so that we can do God’s work. The underlying message in Jesus’ message to travel lightly is that we let go of all that gets in the way of what’s important in seeking God’s will for our lives. And this, in itself, is a challenge, for we all carry within us, some of us more than others, emotional and psychological “stuff” which can weigh us down, holding us back from trusting more deeply in God’s active presence in our lives.

Sometimes we may need spiritual companions or directors or even a good therapist to help let go of what prevents us from living more fully into the persons we are meant to be. God needs us not so much to bring about the kingdom as to notice it’s presence in our lives, which often comes in subtle if not unexpected ways.

I recently read a story about a journalist who decided to spend a year doing jobs that most Americans will not do. One of these jobs was to harvest lettuce. For two months he was the only white person toiling among Mexican migrant workers. He described the back-breaking labors vividly and how he had to become numb to the pains in his back and hands and arms to make it through each day. He had to ignore his fierce thirst from the relentless heat and sun, for to take a break to get water would put him hopelessly behind.

What was most impressive in his story, however, was the way people helped one another in the fields. When one person was sick and could not keep up the pace, all the others automatically took on a bit more of a load to help her get through the day. When something like this happens, we experience a taste of the kingdom of God. This work is so physically strenuous and the pay so meager that few if any would aspire to it; migrants desperate for any income take it gladly. It’s one thing to read about or see a movie about migrant workers in our country and state, whose presence is unwanted yet whose work is indispensable, but it’s something else to intentionally take time to experience people in this setting first hand, like this journalist did. It’s about the journey, not the destination. And to do this, one needs to travel lightly.

Traveling lightly can open us to the mystery of how God’s kingdom breaks into places where we often hesitate to go on the road of our lives.

There are a few opportunities this summer for us as parish family to be present to and witness how God’s kingdom breaks into places we might not think of going on our own. I’d like to just mention two: One is the Dental Clinic at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Washington on Friday, July 16 and Saturday, July 17. It’s a yearly event for our Episcopal deanery, an amazing event to witness, as a host of volunteer dentists and dental assistants tend to countless numbers of poor men, women and children many of whom are anxious and frightened because this is the first opportunity they and their families have to receive dental care. While it helps to understand or speak Spanish, it isn’t necessary. It’s really about our presence, our hospitality, our willingness to simply

be there offering the peace of Christ. God does the rest. The Second event is a work in progress. I've been talking with the folks at the Episcopal Farmworkers' Ministry in Newton Grove about some dates when a small group of us here at St. Paul's can visit and meet with Father Tony and some of the workers at their campsites. While we might be asked to bring some food and refreshments, the primary purpose of this visit will be to simply bring ourselves and share our time with men who terribly miss their families, and who appreciate, I'm told, the willingness of church groups to simply take time to be with them. It's not about our needing to do anything except to go with an open mind and a generous heart. It's about traveling lightly.

These are just two examples of how we, as a parish family, can respond to Jesus' mission to be instruments of peace and hospitality through our willingness to travel together lightly, stepping out of our comfort zones in service of the kingdom of God in our midst.

We're not sent to save the world. God alone does the saving. We are sent to be instruments of peace and hospitality, trusting God to give us what we need, the grace and love, the hope and healing, the courage, strength and patience necessary to make the journey. It's up to us, however, to pay attention to the opportunities we are given to notice and respond to the nearness of the kingdom of God in our lives with others. We'll know these moments when they happen, especially if we're traveling lightly.

Amen.

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