

Proper 9-B  
July 8-9, 2018  
St. John's Cathedral

For some reason I keep getting ads in my e-mail for a compact carry-on bag that is so compact that it can fit under the seat of a plane. Apparently it is very small, but very spacious, too. It holds all the essentials for a short trip - a change of clothes, a pair of shoes, toiletries, small electronics and the like. As someone who often 'over-packs' for trips this sounds both good and sensible.

But even this little bit of stuff would have been too big a load for Jesus' disciples as they set off on their first missionary journey. Mark shares this story, but we read almost identical versions in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Travel light, Jesus tells his disciples as they leave on their rookie missionary journey into the surrounding towns and villages. Take nothing except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money. Wear sandals, but don't take extra clothes. It appears that they are setting out not only to heal and share the good news, but also to depend on the kindness of others for food and shelter.

The little bit we learn of that journey indicates some success. (And a couple of weeks from now we will hear about it in the gospel. This is a 'spoiler alert'.)

The disciples went out with the authority that Jesus gave them to urge their hearers to change their lives and priorities. They chased demons away and cured the sick.

Imagine for a moment that you and I are among those about to be sent into towns and villages by Jesus on our very first missionary journey. It might sound a little daunting, but it shouldn't be impossible to imagine this, because in a way we are the ones being sent today whether we know it or not. And we also have the authority given to us when we are baptized –

when we promise to proclaim by word and example the good news. When we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. Those are powerful things.

Maybe in our time Jesus would say something like , "Take only what you need. Turn your cell phone off. Leave your iPad behind. Be present to people. Listen to them and hear their concerns at a deep level. Respond with love."

I had an encounter with a young woman in Canterbury, England a few summers ago who apparently had been sent out on this kind of a mission. We met her near the bus station as we were getting ready to return to London.

She introduced herself as an evangelist, but didn't seem to fit any of the negative stereotypes of evangelists that we sometimes harbor. She asked a few questions – where were we from, how was the trip, those sorts of things. Then she had a few questions about our religious knowledge. She quickly discovered that we were an Episcopal priest and a Roman Catholic nun, perhaps not her typical tourists. All in all, it was a pleasant conversation and eventually she moved on to some other folks and we caught our bus. Later I thought that if we had any serious needs, she probably would have helped us address them.

Closer to home, Bishop Rehberg, when she was a parish priest in Lewiston, Idaho, brought two seminary students to her parish one summer for an internship. Their job was for the two of them to go out into the community and to listen and to learn—to listen to people around the city who told them about what they saw as the greatest needs – the greatest challenges for their community.

They took the information they gathered back to share with the people in the parish – to inform their sense of mission. In other words, if Lewiston and the wider community was the

parish's mission field, how could they better missionaries? How could they share the good news? How could they help to heal some of the broken parts?

It is said that Episcopalians don't much like the word Evangelism, but this was really about evangelism on a very practical level. (and it may come as a surprise to some that the Episcopal Church actually has a licensed lay ministry called 'evangelist.' It comes in the same section of the canons where we license people to be eucharistic ministers, eucharistic visitors, catechists, preachers and worship leaders.). As far as I know, no one from this diocese has ever gone the route to become an evangelist, but it is an opportunity.

Over the years, we have often focused on how we as a cathedral congregation are sent out into our community (and beyond) to live into our vocation as baptized people. John Wallingford, our senior warden, has suggested that we could be known as the 'church that loves Spokane.' I don't think he means that we have great affection for Spokane. But when we think of love as agape – the self-giving love of God, it makes sense to see ourselves as servants, healers, comforters, encouragers—offering ourselves in a variety of ways without expecting anything in return.

Sometimes it is through reaching out to the hungry, the homeless and others who tend to be marginalized; or working on issues of social justice; or practicing good stewardship of the earth and all we have been given to tend; sometimes it is about being good listeners and people who say their prayers. Prayerfully, we ask what it means to be about God's purpose in and for the world – and specifically in this place.

Stephanie Spellers, in an essay called “Becoming the Missional People of God,” names three ways the Church lives into its vocation of expressing the missional love of God that Jesus came to show us and to send us forth to share.

The first is to be a community of the reign of God. Showing God’s love in a tangible form, she says, should be a sign of the reign of God come alive. The radical hospitality and generosity that stretch us and call us to new visions of what the Church is about. In the near future we will be hosting one or more homeless families here with Family Promise. This is one tangible piece of hospitality that we can share with some folks who need it. How else might that hospitality happen? Let’s ponder that.

The second is to be a messenger of the Reign of God. That means we are called to translate the good news for the local culture – whatever that is: the poor, the elderly, the young, the immigrant, the wealthy, the alienated... whatever culture surrounds us. We can build bridges between the Church and the community and the world. (That’s a ministry that deacons focus on and they can be some of our teachers.) We can listen effectively and learn to speak the language. To share good news with those who desperately need to hear it.

And the third is to be a servant of the reign of God. Jesus, who proclaimed to his sometimes squabbling and ambitious disciples that he was among them as one who serves, put it into perspective for them and for us. His example was to heal the sick, liberate captives, stand with the least, be centered in compassion. As we are called to live into his model, how do we offer ourselves to this service? Opportunities abound and our deacons are also among us as role models and encouragers to help us to engage.

A community we call the Church that is focused on the reign of God – ready to be a messenger and a servant to further God’s purpose in the world, is moving ahead in mission.

Like those rookie disciples, we may start out with a bit of trepidation. And like those rookie disciples, we probably need to learn to travel light – not to be burdened with the heavy baggage that may weigh us down or discourage us. We can do it with the basics. With minimal fuss.

Let me leave you with Eugene Peterson paraphrase of Jesus’ words, “Don’t think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. YOU are the equipment. Keep it simple.”