

7th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
July 8, 2018

Text: Mark 6:1-13

Theme: Sent Out

It is the season to travel and we all have our own packing strategies. I know of people who put more than enough clothes and shoes in their suitcase to cover every conceivable situation that could occur on their trip. I know of people who carry an empty suitcase with them in order to bring home souvenirs. I know of one man who was stopped by security because he had a live 20-pound lobster in his carry-on.

I am none of those people. I consider myself to be a minimalist when it comes to packing. In preparation for every single trip I use the same backpack and the same suitcase. I map out the number of days that I will be gone and at least 72 hours before my departure I lay out one outfit for each of those days. Prior to actually putting something in the suitcase I mull things over to make sure that I have consolidated wherever possible.

Even as a conservative packer I cannot imagine what it would be like to go anywhere in the fashion that Jesus sent out his disciples. Jesus ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, and no money in their belts. They were sent out with only the sandals on their feet and the tunic they were wearing.

Of course they were not heading to a luxurious vacation spot. But even the scouts carry all that they need on their backs. And when we travel with our youth on mission trips we have a long list of items that we are to bring in order to be prepared. It would be ludicrous for me to tell parents that on our next trip we will take nothing with us ... no food, no suitcases, no backpacks, and no money. All we need to bring is ourselves and the clothes on our back. I am not sure anyone would sign up for such a journey.

Jesus' command has always been awkward for me because I always try to apply it literally to our modern world and it never works. But something happened at the ELCA Youth Gathering in Houston that finally gave me a new insight into this reading. And it happened on our very first full day at the event.

After a rousing opening worship on Wednesday night where all 30,000 participants danced and sang to Christian music played by live Christian bands, we all had to drag ourselves out of bed early the next morning. We had to be dressed, done with our breakfast, and be ready to board a bus at 6:30 am for our day of service. We did as we were told only to wait for more than two hours for the bus to arrive. But once underway our excitement grew as we finally learned our assignment for the day. We would be building picnic tables at a local senior center. It was a good, substantial project.

We arrived at the senior center around 9:30 am only to learn that the supplies to build the picnic tables were not delivered yet. So once again we sat down and waited while phone calls were made to get the materials to us as quickly as possible. We waited and we waited and we waited some more. Our lunch arrived at 11:15 am and after we ate our meal it was evident that nothing would be accomplished that day since we had to return to the NRG Arena by 2 pm for Community Life. So we boarded the buses early and left.

It was a very frustrating day. We were all nice about it but we left disappointed. We were ready to work. We wanted to do something for the people in the community. We wanted to get our hands dirty and we were fine if it meant we had to sweat in the heat of Texas. But in hindsight this was the one day (out of the whole week) that taught us the most valuable lesson we can learn in life. We certainly learned to be patient and we learned to be flexible but we learned something more significant. Unbeknownst to us, we were sent to that senior center unencumbered by a schedule and a project. During our time there all we had was ourselves and the people in the senior center.

So let me fill in those hours for you. The seniors started to come into our sitting room to see what was going on and our youth started to engage them in conversation. We told them who we were and why we came to Houston – all 30,000 of us. The room was getting crowded so Helen and I stepped out of the room and went by the entrance where several of the seniors just sat comfortably in some chairs. We spent hours talking with them.

At one point I ventured out into the heat and talked to those who were brave enough to sit in the 100+ degree weather. I heard their stories and they heard my story. Their curiosity about us turned quickly into pure joy because a bunch of young people from the other side of the country were interacting with them. We were a bunch of young people wearing bright orange T-Shirts with the words *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* brazen on our backs and the message *This Changes Everything* written on our fronts. And when I went back into the sitting area it was still packed with our youth and the people who lived there but everyone was quiet so they could hear Emma call out the numbers for a game of Bingo.

Was this the day that we imagined? Absolutely not!

It was the day that we were given and it was up to us to decide what we would do with it. And because of this one day I better understood the mission that we were given on our day of service. We were to bring ourselves and depend on the hospitality of others. We lived out the gospel message for today. When Jesus sent out his disciples with nothing but the clothes on their back they were to enter the homes of others and share with them the good news of Jesus Christ. And that is exactly what we did in Houston although at the time our eyes were blinded and we could not see that very clearly because we wanted to do something with our hands that showed a visible sign that we accomplished something tangible and real for these people.

But it was a life lesson: When our plans change before our eyes then we are to watch to see what God wants us to see and to hear what God wants us to hear and to do what God wants us to do in his holy name. That is as real and tangible as it gets!

I am convinced that if those supplies had arrived at the senior center we would have built those picnic tables without once having a conversation with the people who lived there. Maybe they needed those picnic tables but without the materials to build our project the people who lived there got us instead. We gave them an opportunity to welcome us into their home. We gave them an opportunity to share their stories. And the very best comment came from this one woman who told me (with a huge smile on her face) – *I just spilled my guts in there to those young people. Now I have to go to my room and put them all back in again.*

These trips we take with our youth are invaluable but the lessons we learn are lessons for all of us. Every Sunday we are sent out into the mission field to proclaim the gospel message and to cast out the evil we experience in this world and to touch the lives of those who need healing. We are to take nothing with us except for the love we have for God through Christ. Free from our burdens we are to be ready for what God wants us to see and to hear and to do in his holy name.

It may not be the day we imagined but it will be the day we are given. It will be up to us to decide what we will do with it.

Amen