

*Just Under 6,000 Pounds*  
Mark 6:1-13  
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*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, new friends in ministry: good morning. It is such a joy to be with you this morning, to be joining in worship here, and to be stepping into this pulpit. I love to preach the good news of Jesus Christ – of love stronger than death, of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, of the myriad ways God is made known in our lives; it is fitting, and I am so glad, that my first introduction of any length to this congregation is through preaching.

And yet, I have a confession. This week, the lectionary Gospel text strikes me personally, and convicts me powerfully. Smart practice in times of pastoral transition might suggest that I would keep the confessionals at a minimum until we know each other a bit better. But I find myself stuck on this, unable to move on. When the Gospel convicts you, you're supposed to bear witness.

So, here goes: I, your new associate pastor, the one appointed and designated to care for your education as Christians and that of your children, have spent the last several weeks directly

disregarding Jesus's instructions to his disciples from the sixth chapter of Mark.

In these recent days, my beloved husband Josh and I have dedicated countless hours to packing, packing, packing... packing boxes of clothes and books and files and toddler toys and baking supplies and dishes and music and linens and more books.... On moving day, the head of the moving crew gave me a contract to sign noting, among other things, that the net weight of our stuff, the net weight of our material lives, came in at just under 6,000 pounds.

In the week in which we read from Mark's gospel, *he ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics*, in this week, I have packed and moved these very things – bread and bags and money and sandals and several tunics – and just under 6,000 pounds of other stuff to boot!

The funny thing is, we gave away so much stuff prior to the move – and still we wound up with nearly three tons worth of essential items – things we have accumulated and from which we did not wish to part.

*Forgive me, Lord.*

It's funny, too, because normally I am such a fan of the notion of "traveling light." Of not becoming too attached to any

item, to anything, or place or community... I grew up in the itinerancy – I'm a United Methodist preacher's kid, and so I was raised in the system that moved us every few years. I always considered myself practiced at moving, skilled in the spiritual discipline of traveling light, and managing change. This week I found that I am actually better at traveling light in a metaphorical sense. That my commitment to this call from Jesus Christ is really more theoretical than practical...

It is hard for us to face change, is it not? Surely, while I have personal problems with the accumulation of heavy books and papers, I am not alone in this. In fact, one of the universally asked questions on intake questionnaires for those beginning therapy or counseling relationships, or for patients seeking medical help in dealing with stress is, *have you experienced any major life changes lately?*

Change can be a good thing – the list of major life changes includes new job, marriages, the birth of a child – but even the very best sorts of changes involve loss of some variety. I remember just sobbing for days after Fiona – the light of my life was born – due in large part to postpartum hormonal craziness – because my life would never be the same; I would always – or at least for a solid twenty years or so – be directly and hugely responsible for another person. My carefree days were done. I

wasn't a kid anymore. As much as I rejoiced in her birth, I mourned that loss.

I say this, hedging my bets that you won't immediately write me off as a terrible mother; I say this in the confidence that you, too, have known this tension: between old and new, between embracing change with its excitement and opportunity, and grieving what is no more, between traveling light and building relationships and making ties..

After all, some of those most wonderful life changes decrease our ability to travel light as Jesus describes– to pick up and go without concern for bread, bag, or money. We can't do that as easily as we get older, as we get situated: job changes for us raise questions about our spouses' employment; moves mean different schools for children, and the need to make new friends, and to say goodbye to old ones.

Jesus was, I think, aware of this all too human dilemma. For, the same Jesus who tells us to pick up and go, who turns over tables in the Temple and angers the Pharisees: this is the same Jesus who says that he has come not to change the law, not one dot on one "i", only to fulfill it. He knows how we are burdened, not just by objects and things, but also by the weight of our commitment to what has been – to what we have always known. This awareness is obvious in his very wise, fairly bemused

assessment of the response of the people to his preaching and teaching in his hometown, which we presume to be Nazareth, though Mark doesn't say. The people there listen to him preach, and hear him speak of the reign of God and the call to discipleship, and they are astounded... and offended. *Who is this kid? Isn't that Mary's boy? We know him; we've known him all his life. Where did this "wisdom" suddenly come from?*

The tone suggested in the Gospel – particularly as I've paraphrased it – is one almost of derision, but I don't want to downplay the astonishment of the people. Mark says they are *astounded* to hear what Jesus has to say – flabbergasted, maybe, to see him in this way: as we do to see a childhood friend all grown up and married, or an adult child now working as a doctor... We may appreciate the change, but we're not sure that grants some kid, beloved though he or she may be, any authority. Hence Jesus's wry comment, *Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.*

It's not always intended as a malicious thing, but it's dismissive nonetheless. I once returned to a church of my youth to serve as a guest preacher, and the text for the day was a really prophetic one. I thought it would be great – I had known the people for so long, they trusted me and I loved them, so I could speak a prophetic truth in love. Or so I thought. A number of

folks responded positively, to be sure... but there was a group – a good, sizable group – who hugged me warmly afterward and immediately began telling stories about me as a four year old in the church, marching up and down the sanctuary aisle with my little purse swinging. *Isn't it amazing? How grown up she is now?* They were nothing less than pleasant... but they couldn't believe I might have anything to actually teach them as a preacher of the Gospel.

We spend a lot of time developing our views of the world, growing into our own identities and our values, figuring out how to navigate human life, how to look for God and hear the Gospel. To face change, then, is to have all of that hard, time-consuming work, be challenged. For many, an initial reaction to such a challenge is to feel threatened, to build up our defenses, to hunker down and wait it out. As Christians, though, we are called to examine our assumptions, and the practices that have become routine, always – to examine which parts of our lives are bearing witness to the Gospel, which may need some fine-tuning, and which may need the life-changing presence of the Holy Spirit to work on them.

We are called, somehow, to travel lightly – but also to continue to carry the weight of our traditions and our common history and common hopes. We are called, as disciples, to live into

this tension – to allow ourselves the freedom to appreciate and experience the joys and challenges of both old and new.

On this Independence Day weekend, it may be worth mentioning that Americans have experience with this – and may have some cultural resources to help us think about how we are to do this. This weekend, many of us have been celebrating the wonders of this nation's ideals – our commitments to freedom and equality. But another cardinal American virtue, it seems to me, has always been innovation: creative adaptation to changing circumstances. The genius of the American governmental system is that it so well holds together the need for consistency, for institutions we can depend on, for protections for individuals and communities, while also allowing for openness, transparency, and change. With all the turmoil in Iran in recent weeks – which has been so exciting and so terrifying, so hope-filled and so nerve-wracking – it is good to be reminded of the singular miracle of the American system: the peaceful transfer of power. One of the hallmarks of our tradition, built right into those sturdy institutions, is openness to change.

We have experience, then, with living into this tension. In knowing how to appreciate both old and new, in treasuring that which has given us meaning and hope over the years while opening our hearts and minds to continued growth in love and

grace and wisdom. Our task, always, is to continue to discern what are the things that we should carry with us, and what are the things that we can leave behind.

While I may be an experienced mover, my resume pales in comparison to that of my mother, who was raised in an army family before marrying an itinerant pastor. She moved a dozen times before her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, attending four elementary schools, two junior highs, and two high schools. She packs like a pro... though she hates every minute of it. She was a shy kid – is an introverted adult – and it was hard for her to be so uprooted, all the time. My sisters and I were still young when we realized the primary means of her coping with all of that change. My mother sets up shrines. Not to the Virgin Mary or Buddha or her ancestors – though she's always called them shrines, they don't feature any particular religious content. Nevertheless, I'd argue that they're holy things.

When she was a kid, moving all those times, she'd set up her dresser top just so – no matter whether they were in Texas or Virginia or Germany or Alabama. In every place, she had the same photos and books and little knickknacks and a silver dish... treasured objects she'd accumulated over the years. Little things that kept her memories close and, moreover, reminded her of who she was. Lauri Burris, the same girl in Texas or Virginia or

Germany or Alabama, daughter of Jean and Al, big sister to Jeff, avid reader, lover of animals, collector of charms, child of God. Her shrine was the manifestation of her identity – and it all fit in one, clearly labeled moving box.

The Christian life is a complicated thing – the Gospel periodically pulling us in opposite directions – between tradition and change – but Jesus is not worried. He sends the disciples out with all the tools they need. Not 6,000 pounds of expectations and memories and traditions – but carrying one, clearly labeled box: their identities as his disciples, their faith in his power and God’s holy presence. For them, and for us, it is all we need, wherever the world may locate us and wherever the Lord may lead us. Amen.