

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 30
Luke 10:1-11

First United Church of Christ, Northfield
Rev. Sandra K. Johnson
July 8, 2007

Traveling Light

I tried something new on my trip to Hartford for the UCC General Synod: I reduced the size of my luggage. I am usually the person struggling to haul my big suitcase, but this time I really only took what I would need – no extra outfits in case I changed my mind, no dressy shoes, no magazines that I wouldn't have time to read. When I found a great bargain on children's books for our church nursery, I walked them across the street to Kinko's and shipped them back home. And I have to tell you that I had a much easier time at the airports and hotels – mentally as well as physically. I not only had less to carry, I had less to worry about.

Something like that happens to the youth who go on our mission trip, too. The vans don't have much room for luggage, so each person has to be very mindful about what to take along. They are always surprised at how much they can get done – and what a good time they have – when they aren't lugging around a lot of belongings.

I think that's what Jesus had in mind when he gave packing instructions to his followers: "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals;" [Luke 10:4]. Our spiritual journeys, like our geographic ones, are easier when we don't tote too much with us.

The lesson is most obvious with our material possessions. Most of us simply own too many things. One look around my basement, or in my closet, or on my bookshelf, makes the point. We fill up our cabinets and shelves and corners with objects that once caught our attention, or once filled a need, or once belonged to our children or parents. Caring for them, storing them, and eventually deciding what to do with them make us tired and crabby. Nearly everyone who "downsizes" reports some relief from the process of disposing of some of this overload. It is worth asking: Do you really believe that God intends for you to spend this much of your time and resources on the things that you own?

But it is not only material possessions that weigh us down; it is also the load of busyness that many of us carry. Many people in this room have taken on more than can be done comfortably and effectively in their lives. More importantly, many people in this room have taken on so much that there is little time left for nurturing the spiritual life, let alone a moment for good old fashioned sloth. Let me challenge you with this question: do you really believe that God wants you to be burdened by this much activity?

The busyness often reflects something else we have too many of: "oughts" – our sense of how much we are supposed to do and be. Some of these are substantial and important: the call to be persons of integrity and compassion, the duty to love and care for our families. Some, however, are less substantial and more paralyzing: the

necessity of being excellent at all times and in all things, the need to feel particular ways towards particular people (even if we don't really), the insistence that things (from folding the laundry to managing the retirement portfolio) must be done in one and only one way. The challenge question here: do you really believe that God requires all of this of you? (If you do, please go back and reflect on the song we are singing for the children this summer, about which "oughts" God really does care about.)

Another load we carry is full of the unfinished business of human relationships and the emotional injuries that we have suffered in our lives. My friend Debra Farrington says that the mark of a healthy life is that you really can fit all of that baggage under the seat in front of you. Humor aside, the joy and intensity of our present lives can be seriously compromised by the unhealed disappointments, resentments, losses, and angers we carry with us. Healing can come from many sources – wise friends, artistic expression, spiritual direction, counseling or therapy, even rest and good food. The question I leave with you should be familiar by now: Do you really believe that God wants you to continue to suffer from these past experiences?

The church, no less than individuals, has baggage to carry. Our house of worship, just like our homes, gets cluttered and glutted with too many things. We try to do a lot – maybe too much, and we fall into habits of busyness rather than faithfulness. We burden ourselves with a sense of what we ought to be doing, instead of remembering to celebrate what we do get done. And we carry bumps and bruises from our past – including the past that we brought with us from other places and other Christian traditions.

When all of that is too much with us, it is worth remembering that there is another sense in which we are invited to "travel light" in our spiritual journeys: we are invited to travel in the light.

The theme for the United Church of Christ's 50th anniversary celebration is "Let It Shine." We began and ended our worship at General Synod with that simple children's song, "This little light of mine ..." (which has, it turns out, several different tunes and versions). But we are wise to remember that the light isn't really ours at all; it comes from God:

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.
What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it. [John 1:1-5]*

There are lots of ways to travel in the light:

- walking in the light, resting in God's mercy and in the promise of God's shalom
- reflecting the light, so that others can see it, especially those who have not really heard the Good News yet
- tending the light, so that it will be passed to the next generation of faithful people
- focusing the light, so that it shines most brightly on those places and situations where mercy and compassion are most desperately needed
- being a prism for the light, breaking it up into all of the colors of the rainbow, showing the variety of ways that it can come to us
- sharing images of what the light has illuminated for you, whether in art or science or music or movement

We are, my friends, children of the light, even though we live in a world of burdens and darkness. Jesus Christ calls us to travel light – to set aside the unnecessary loads we are carrying. And Jesus calls us to travel in the light, with the light, on behalf of the light, and in celebration of the light. Let it shine!

Amen.

Prayer for July 8, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

Gracious God, we ask your blessing for our families each time we celebrate a wedding or baptism; this morning we come asking for an everyday blessing for our households.

Help us, we pray, to receive each day as a holy gift, whether it seems to contain momentous events or mundane ones. Let our waking bring an opening of our spirits as well as of our eyes, and grant us a moment of thanksgiving before we are swept up by the events and duties of our lives.

As we gather for meals, let our prayers of gratitude be offered not only for the abundant and wholesome food we have before us but, but also for the labor of the farmers, processors, truckers, and grocers who have brought it to our table. Give us, at least occasionally, the grace to see the wonder of a warm slice of bread or a crisp carrot or a sweet cookie.

Be present with us, we pray, in our conversations and interactions with family, neighbors, co-workers, and strangers. Nudge us into small acts of generosity and forbearance that build trust, friendship, and community among us. Help us to choose the gentle word, the kind suggestion, the respectful question. When the opportunity comes to speak a word of justice, give us the courage and the vocabulary to speak it.

God of the laborers in the vineyard, we ask your blessing on our labor, in whatever vineyard we may find ourselves. Help us to hear your call in every task, whether that task is honored by others or not. Help us, too, to find ways that what we do can be a blessing for others, in ways small or large. However busy we may be, whisper a reminder for us to pause and remember you. However distant we may sometimes feel, let the hum of your spirit call us back.

We ask your blessing, too, on our leisure time and play. Fill us with the laughter that refreshes and renews us, and makes it possible for us to face the serious challenges and issues before us. Help us to stretch our bodies and our minds; help us to put our worries and preoccupations into perspective, and to see the world with your loving and hospitable eyes.

And finally, God of all our days, we ask your presence with us in our sleeping. Let our rest be deep and sustaining, and let our dreams be filled with wisdom and hope.

all these things we pray in the name of the one in whom you lived a wholly human and wholly holy life, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...