

Sermon for Sunday, July 9, 2017

TRAVEL LIGHT

When I watch the evening news now, which is about the rancor of politics, the destruction by terrorists, the tragedy of the opioid epidemic, and the threat of violent weather, I find myself wistful for the reports of Charles Kuralt, in his segment called “On the Road.” Remember him? His assignment—arguably the best one in journalism—was to travel across our nation discovering and reporting upon life in America. His was not to critique American life, or judge it. His was not to investigate foul play, or report on all that was wrong with our country. His vocation was lighter than all that, and really, more important. He was to lift up for our edification and celebration the people who in ordinary ways give shape to American culture. So he toured the nation in his RV, observing and reporting on American life. It was priceless.

“On the Road” with Charles Kuralt, was like eating Ted Drew’s at the end of a lackluster meal. It gave us something to enjoy and smile about. But it also reminded us that life is a gift, to be discovered and savored, and that what makes America great is not its politicians, or its corporations, or its Gross National Product, or its military, but is its people, its humble citizens, who know that being about the stuff of community, is what really matters.

In Eureka, Missouri, they celebrated the 4th of July this last week with joy and thanksgiving. It could have been otherwise, because once again this spring, the town faced the threat of damaging flood waters, like the ones a year ago that devastated their downtown. But not this year. This year, in advance of the flood, the townspeople came together, contributing hours of time, aching muscles and sweat-drenched brows, to sandbag the downtown. It worked. The town was spared. And their celebration of Independence Day took on new meaning. It was a celebration not just of national pride, but of community, and a demonstration of the spirit, and the faith, that makes America great.

Some of the churches in our presbytery were not so fortunate this spring and suffered damage from the flood. At its meeting a week and a half ago, our Session, which was asked to help, approved an allocation of \$10,000 to assist them. It’s what brothers and sisters are called to do as disciples of Christ, and what we are able to do because of the additional resources available to our Mission Committee from the Giving Thanks Capital Campaign which you supported so generously.

Speaking for our church members who physically participate in our mission work, I can tell you that what makes the work so special—like filling sand bags in a flood—is not just the camaraderie, but the *lightness of being* you experience. It is the assurance—rare enough in life—that nothing you have to do is more important than helping a neighbor in need to have a home, to learn a school subject well, or to settle into a new land. The outdoor work, like at Habitat, is hard, hot, and challenging. The tutoring ministry is not as hot, but it’s also challenging. Yet despite that, the experience is exhilarating. You know that you are involved in something important, and meaningful, and timeless, a tangible and visible demonstration of God’s amazing love.

I have the suspicion, reinforced for me by today’s scripture reading, that Jesus enjoyed that incredible *lightness of being* all the time, and that this is what he meant when he said that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. He was wholly committed to the ministry of the kingdom of God. He never knew a moment in which he “should be” anywhere else, or “ought to be” someone else. Compared to the lives of quiet desperation he saw all around him, his yoke was easy and his burden was light.¹ He lived an exhilarating life. And even though at the end of his life he was carrying the weighty burden and the cruel yoke of the cross, he knew even at that moment, that the most important thing he could be was a faithful child of God, and the most important thing he could do was to love God and love those who were persecuting him.

¹ Garret Keizer, *The Christian Century*, June 16-23, 1999, p. 645.

The good news of the gospel is not only that Jesus was right, but that Jesus invites us along for the ride. “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” To follow Jesus is to live an exhilarating life. It’s to be working on God’s house, the kingdom of heaven, loving God and neighbor, not entirely sure what you are doing or that your talent will suffice, but fully assured in your mind, heart and spirit that there’s nothing more important on your agenda. To follow Jesus is to travel light, unencumbered by superfluous baggage.

This does not mean however, that we have to dump all our baggage to follow Jesus, or that we get to set aside all our burdens. Jesus does not invite us to *detach* ourselves from life, or from our neighbors, to attend to God. On the contrary, Jesus’ invitation is to *attach* ourselves to life and to our neighbors in a much more profound way. He invites us to attach ourselves to life in God’s way, which is love’s way. There is simply no more important agenda, no more important business, no more important purpose in life, than to love God and neighbor with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And when we are able, through faith, to commit all our activities—work, play, and study—in service to the Kingdom, then we know the incredible *lightness*, of being on the road with Jesus.

Tragically, much of the time, we are either like those children in the marketplace, who find fault with Jesus because he won’t play their game, or we are like Jesus’ home town of Capernaum that was so proud of its association with Jesus that it didn’t hear a word he said. The kingdom of God is not about playing human games successfully, nor is it about knowing the right person or knowing the right things. It’s about loving the right person, and living toward the right end.

America has become alarmingly like Capernaum, I think. It is proud of its Christian heritage, and because it has *been* a Christian nation it assumes that it still *is*. It isn’t a Christian nation anymore. It just has an association with Jesus through its churches, not a relationship of faith in him. And just like Capernaum, it’s dangerous for it to continue to live with the illusion of righteousness by association. The Christian Church is being pushed aside by American culture and relegated to the margins of America’s cultural landscape. And while that is a bit unnerving to the Church, I think it is actually a good thing. It’s causing the Church to look at itself and remind itself of its purpose, and of its Lord. We have been attached at the hip to the American culture so long, that we have become burdened with its ends, and weighted down with its goals, and steered by its values. As a result, we have lost the *lightness* of being on the road with Jesus that is exhilarating, and attractive, and infectious, that singleness of purpose that seeks to build the community of the kingdom of heaven that searches for God’s lost children, and that celebrates life as a gift.

Detaching ourselves from American culture is not the answer though, and tempting as that may be, Jesus does not grant us that option. Instead, we have to attach ourselves to the culture through faith in Jesus Christ, living in it as his body, observing it through his eyes, speaking to it with his voice, and transforming it with his love. In Christ, we are freed from the burden of being right or righteous, because he is. In Christ, we are rescued from the sidelines and from casual associations, because Jesus is utterly committed to God’s cause. In Christ we get the rest that comes to those who put their complete trust in him no matter what.

So come to him, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and let him give you rest. Take his yoke upon you, and learn from him; for he is gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Get on the road with Jesus to the kingdom of heaven, and travel *light*. Discover the exhilarating assurance that you are involved in the most important task in the world, serving God and neighbor, and that your life and the life of others is a gift to be discovered and savored.

PRAYER: Almighty God, help us experience again that exhilarating *lightness* of being “on the road” with Jesus to the kingdom of heaven, and help us commit ourselves again to his way. We ask it in Christ’s name. Amen.

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