

“Dust Free Sandals and No Suitcase”

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Text: Mark 6:1-13

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After traveling all around Galilee, Jesus decides to make a trip back to His hometown of Nazareth. And you would think that His own people would have welcomed Him with open arms and been most receptive to His message. But they aren't. They just couldn't believe that God's Messiah could come in somebody so ordinary, so common. "Isn't this the carpenter?" they ask. They knew Jesus's whole family – nice people, but still there is nothing special about them. They've never run for school board or had their home featured in the Nazareth Parade of Homes. Nothing spectacular about Jesus or His family. But when the Messiah comes it's going to be spectacular. He'll come on flaming chariots through the clouds or something, and there will be music and angels and fireworks. You think you saw big fireworks at the park Tuesday night? You ain't seen nothing yet! So the Messiah isn't going to be some ordinary, hometown carpenter who quietly slips into town to visit His family.

Jesus, the hometown boy who has amazed the crowds and attracted strangers is rejected by the people who know Him the best and love Him the most. And you might think that after that rejection Jesus would have had enough. After all, if your hometown church doesn't back you, why bother? But Jesus doesn't quit. In fact, He is driven even harder for the sake of God's mission. So, to get things going, Jesus decides to send the disciples out by themselves to do some preaching and healing. That Jesus chooses this particular moment to usher His disciples forth into their first solo missions is somewhat surprising. They have evidenced no great new insight into Jesus and His message. They're still bumbling about two steps behind each punchline in His parables, about three steps behind in recognizing the meaning of His miracles. Yet, despite their imperfect comprehensions, Jesus sends them out, trusting them to spread His work. But before they go, He gives them a pep talk. He warns them that it's not going to be a cake walk. As badly as the world needs to hear about God's coming kingdom, it may not want to hear about it. So Jesus tells His disciples that there will be rejection, but that they must not let that response pull them down. Rejection can be like quicksand – you can sink in it, it can swallow you whole. Sometimes you have to shake the dust off of your feet and move on. They couldn't afford to be weighed down by rejection, or anything else, including their possessions. In fact Jesus spends more time stripping the disciples of presumed traveling necessities than He does outfitting them for their expedition.

His instructions seem foolish: Take no bread, no bag, no money, not even an extra tunic for warmth or sturdy shoes just in case. The only equipment Jesus advises them to take along is a staff – an item to facilitate movement, not slow them down. Jesus doesn't sit down with the twelve and a map, or a snakebite kit, or a pack of provisions or a feasibility study, or a set of goals and objectives. Jesus gives the disciples only what they need most: a mission and an authority to carry it out. He says, "Leave the baggage at home and shake the dust off your sandals." Is that still good advice for we Christians as we travel on our faith journeys? What does it mean for us to take no baggage and have dust free sandals?

It suggests a couple of things to me. First, when we are sharing Christ's message with others, we leave at home our theological and emotional baggage, our prejudices, our pre-judgments of people with whom we will come in contact. Leave at home the baggage that tells us we're not qualified to talk with others about our faith, put in storage the idea that somehow we're not good enough, we don't know enough, to be in a given leadership position or teach a certain class. Traveling lightly may mean that those who can be the best disciples of Jesus are those who are lay persons, persons who don't carry around the stuff we clergy do.

The other thing that this advice about traveling light says to me is to not get hung up on possessions or things because the "things" to which we hold so tightly are the very same things that get in the way of our relationship with God. In addition, when we're dealing with persons for whom faith and church is not part of their world, they may get the impression that they must have the things we have in order to claim the gospel as their own.

Speaking of things, can you imagine Jesus ordering twelve pairs of sandals from the local sandal-maker? I can just hear the disciples when Jesus hands them each a pair. Peter says, "Master, I want the kind of sandals you can pump up." Philip says, "I'd rather wear flip-flops." Thomas says, "How come mine don't have the swoosh on them?" John says, "Jesus, did you get ones with lights on them? They're awesome!" James shoves his pair back in the box, tosses them back to Jesus, "Only nerds wear plain sandals. I want Birkenstocks." Jesus tosses them back and says, "This isn't about looks, image, or what's cool. Wear these –

forget about what's on your feet – that's not important. What is important is our message! Wear these sandals and be ready to shake off the dust." If instead of an open door, the disciples get the door slammed in their faces, Jesus counsels a judicious use of their time and energy. He advises His missionaries to cajole and convince reluctant listeners, but to shake the dust of a rejecting household off their feet as they leave. If people don't listen, well, you tried. Don't let it get to you. Put them behind you and move on. Shake the dust off and keep moving. That advice is a little tougher for me to swallow.

After all, most of us want to be liked, or if we can't be liked, we at least want to be listened to. We want our message to be heard. When we draw our breath in pain to show that which is most personal and valued – our faith – when we go out of our way to perform an act of Christian kindness, when we make ourselves vulnerable, when we risk by sharing ourselves, when we do all that and are met with a cold shoulder or deaf ears or a hardened heart or harsh words – well, how do you respond? We may feel hurt, or angry, or betrayed. But if it's someone we really care about and want to reach, we may be reluctant to shake off the dust, and instead look at our feet and wonder what we tracked in or what we just stepped into. Most of us don't like to give up on someone – after all, God's love never gives up on us, so shouldn't our love be the same? How does that jive with the advice of Jesus?

If someone rejects me, or my preaching, or my pastoral care – if someone leaves the church for whatever reason – I have a tough time letting go. But Jesus says, "Keep moving. Do what you can do, and then don't worry about it. Let it go." I know that many of you have, in Christian love, extended your hands to others outside the church – and maybe within the church – only to have those hands ignored or slapped. Are you able to say, "Well, I did my best. I tried," and then move on, or do you spend time and energy agonizing and obsessing over the rejection? It's a tough assignment. Most of us don't want rejection to have the final word.

I am certain Jesus didn't want rejection to win out either, but His message is so important, is so critical, the Kingdom of God is at hand and there simply is not time to squander by remaining where you're not being heard. Grandma Engle used to say, "Don't go places you're not invited." Jesus says, "Don't stay in places where you're not welcome." The disciples are given a task, but no goal or quota; they are to proclaim the message with all their being, including their outward behavior, but the responsibility for the outcome must be left to God. The gesture of shaking off the dust was performed by Jews when they returned to the Holy Land from a Gentile region and wished to leave everything unclean behind them. In the disciples' case, the gesture would be an unmistakable warning to those who refused to repent so that they might recognize the seriousness of their action. Do you know anyone who punctuates a disagreement with a door slam to get your attention? Jesus tells the disciples – don't sweat it if someone refuses to listen – leave them. But before you leave, let them know how critical their rejection really is.

To appreciate the words "shake off the dust" is to realize that some persons are not yet ready to listen to us, no matter how eager or sincere we are in wanting to share Christ with them. "Shake off the dust" reminds me that I won't be able to be a pastor to every person that I try to be – for whatever reason. I will not be able to meet the pastoral needs of some persons. You will not be able to reach every person to whom you extend a Christian hand – nor will this church. Jesus tells us that's okay, because you may be able to reach someone who thinks I'm out to lunch. I might be able to speak a word, perhaps the same word you've been saying, to someone who has yet to respond to you. That's why we need each other.

You see, Jesus told His disciples that they could take only what they absolutely needed and not one thing more – no bread, no money, no American Express card, no cell phone. None of that stuff, only what they absolutely needed: one staff, one pair of sandals, one tunic, and one companion. Jesus sent them out in pairs. He could have sent them out alone and they might have covered twice the territory that way. But He didn't – He paired them up because He knew that to do the job before them they needed each other. Sure they could get along without their IPOD, an extra tunic, or even a church brochure. But they couldn't leave home without each other.

They needed each other, and so do we. Lots of things in our life of faith we can do alone – pray, read Scripture, contemplate creation. But we cannot work for the mission of Christ alone. We need others to help us, help in spreading the good news, help in bringing healing to this broken world. Now there will be times, when, just like the disciples, we want to see eye to eye. We may bug each other. But that doesn't matter. To do God's work we still need each other to bear each other's burdens, to keep each other encouraged and faithful, to believe for one another when faith comes hard, to hold firm to one another when the storms come.

The job is still big if we take it seriously. The world remains in need of healing and in need of the promise and grace of God. Pick up the paper, turn on the television. It is an awesome and challenging ministry to which we are called. And so God has given us to each other, as companions, as brothers and sisters, as fellow workers, as partners for the sake of Jesus Christ.

As pastor Larry Henning wrote:

 Ideal or not we *are* God's gift to one another. Sometimes that is harder to see than others: when we've been fighting over something or when our nerves are frayed or when we have been let down. Sometimes it is . . . hard to see others in the Body of Christ as God's gift to us or ourselves as God's gift to them.

 But we are – perfect or not, ideal or not, cantankerous or not, we are. We are because Christ binds us together as brothers and sisters. And because, although we are earthen (sometimes cracked) vessels to be sure, we are nonetheless bearers of Christ to one another.

 Jesus sent the disciples out on a tough assignment, but he gave them everything they needed. And now he sends us out and the assignment hasn't gotten any easier, but he still gives us everything we need: his promise, his word, his presence . . . and each other.