

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 11, 2015
Pilgrimage to the Manger
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Mark 10:17-31

REFLECTION

“(S)He who would travel happily must travel light.”

-Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, French author

“Excess baggage is a symptom of something we are missing on the inside – a fear that we won’t be accepted for what we are, as if our selves are not enough. We bring too much of our past experience, the clutter of our emotions. These things get in the way and keep us from getting close to others. Then we are left with the task of having to find someone else to carry it, whether it is our luggage or our loneliness.”

-Mary Morris, N.Y. Times

Unpacking for the Journey

Backpacking was a popular “thing” when I was growing up. Everything a person needed was tucked onto a frame and tied onto the back with hip and shoulder straps. The Kittlaus, Johnson and Cohen families packed into a trail in the Cascade Mountains – every kid and adult carrying their own sleeping bag and clothes – with adults adding a family tent and cooking equipment. When I was 17 I hitchhiked around the British Isles with two friends named Cathy – each of us with our pack. Later my Dad and I – (and Rita Nakashima Brock, come to think of it) – packed into the Havasupai Canyon – next to the Grand Canyon – with a few other friends. And then there was the Ameripass trip with Greyhound – an open ticket for a month to travel across the United States and back visiting friends and relatives.

I learned how to pack light, fix a broken or bent frame, carry more on my hips than on my back. I learned that you don’t need a guitar to sing (which lightens the load considerably) – and freeze-dried food is lighter than canned – and you actually need half the number of underpants than you think you do. The traveling is much more about your traveling companions, the people you meet and the places you see and experience – which makes books and choices of shoes much less necessary – although one could argue the case for at least one good book that could be traded out.

Quality counted, quantity reduced, costs cut, company valued.

Backpacking was an experience of immediacy – the focus on a present moment in a certain place. I gained awareness of what my body could sustain and when it was time to rest or rehydrate. Beauty and reunion and a good story counted for a lot. A photograph and a memory were much more manageable than a souvenir.

After a three-day trip into the Grand Canyon proper with a UCC youth group - we met up with a young man who had attempted to hike down and up in a single day – without water. We shared our water with him, helped him pace himself and encouraged him and he made it – which was questionable when we found him. He invited us for “dinner” at his van – an amazing, painted wonder lined with hundreds of pirated Grateful Dead cassettes and plush, furry pillows. Now there’s a memory with a soundtrack. He is most likely a Burner, if he survived his own youthful mistakes...

The ethic of sharing and sustaining each other is part of the experience of backpacking – along with the expectation of self-reliance. There are rules that accompany the culture: pack it in, pack it out – take only what you need – stay on the trail – try to add to rather than detract from the experience of others – be cool.

Jesus would have fit in. I probably met him without knowing it on several of my trips. His ethic was – and still is – out there on the road and on the trails.

But I have to confess – that after learning all of those lessons – I have not lived accordingly for a number of years now. I’ve set up housekeeping and inherited belongings from numerous grandparents. I have brought home souvenirs and created a garage full of file boxes full of papers and books I couldn’t throw away because I might need them someday. I have so much stuff it overwhelms me. And there is no way I’m taking it with me. It would be a tragedy and a relief if the garage burned down and I could regain some of that immediacy and refocus on my surroundings and relationships.

I know what Jesus would say about all of it:

Burn it.

It’s easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle

than for a person of means – with a lot of stuff – to get into G-d’s house.

And he meant it.

Editors have tried to soften it with translations and interpretations.

The Greek word for rope (*kamilon*) is close to the word for camel (*kamelon*) – so he must have meant rope. There is a city gate called “the eye” – he must have been referring to that – which is actually more possible than the eye of a needle.

But that’s not the Jesus we know. He meant a real needle and a real camel. And it’s not just a suggestion – it is a necessity for physical and spiritual well-being – for gaining proximity to The Holy – for understanding what really matters – in this life and beyond.

And losing the physical baggage is only the beginning. Without having to be caretakers of property, we have more room and energy to cull and curate our emotional baggage.

It gives us time to repair relationship, heal ourselves and our loved ones, to lean on each other through the tough times – and dance on the tables with each other in the good times.

It gives us time to make our bucket list happen – and experience every moment of life that we have left.

This Pilgrimage that we are on is not a caravan of RVs – or even painted vans filled with Grateful Dead cassettes.

It is a backpacking trip – perhaps with day-packs or fanny-packs instead.

It is a long line of human beings walking together –

stretching back to our ancestors – and forward to our descendants –

sharing supplies and stories and experiences along the way –

and taking note of the beauty and the sadness

of our planet –

of life –

of each breath we take –

until the last.

Mark 10:17-31

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'"

20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"

27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

28 Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."

29 Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age--houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions--and in the age to come eternal life.

31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Greek

Rope

Kamilon

Camel

Kamelon