



Proper 14, Year C – July 4, 2010

Luke 10.1-11,16-20

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

It is, let us say, April 1 in Calgary, and I am packing a bag for Ottawa. Now, I am the daughter of a naval officer, and I learned at about age 5, how to roll my shirts, stuff my shoes, and coordinate my colours, so as to maximize the space available in my suitcase. Which is a good thing, because I do not believe that I have ever traveled anywhere with less than half of what I own! Winter boots, umbrella. Blue jeans, business suit. Computer, phone charger, headset. And books, way too many books. Plus, I must always leave some room for whatever little trinkets and additions to my wardrobe I might accumulate on the way. That is in addition, of course, to all the other tedious preparations which precede any trip: travel insurance, ready access to cash, an itinerary, and hotel reservations.

And Jesus says to the seventy, whom he is about to send ahead of him to prepare his way:

Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals...

In other words, you need to get going. Forget the suitcase. Further, what I am asking you to do won't cost you any money, and it won't make you any money, either. So you can leave your purse at home, too.

It is, by any standard, strange advice – and like much Semitic writing, an example of over-statement in order to make a point.

So what, we may ask, is Jesus' point?

In the first place, we need to remember a key piece of information we heard last week, namely that at this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus has "set his face to Jerusalem," and he is on his way there to die. One of the things I learned through my sister's illness is that impending death has a way of clarifying the mind, and of introducing a new urgency to the things that really matter. Because, you see, when there's not much time left, you can't be leaving things till tomorrow. Jesus wants to bring word of God's compassion and liberation to as many people as he possibly can before he dies. So what does he do? He picks 70 of his followers, and sends them on ahead to till the soil, as it were, in preparation for his own visit. In Jesus' mind, there's no time to be lost. Forget rolling your shirts, and stuffing shoes – just go! Get on with it.

But, secondly, more even than Jesus' sense of urgency, is his conviction that the work he is sending the 70 to do requires that they learn to travel lightly.

I remember a pre-ordination retreat I once attended. My job was to make a speech about how important an annual retreat is, and to introduce the retreat conductor. Tim began by outlining the agenda, which included several talks, opportunities for worship, and for the retreatants to make their confession. Now, this is pretty standard fare prior to ordination, but would not likely have been a habitual practice for many of the ordinands. I will never forget how Tim encouraged those present to take advantage of this opportunity, both during the retreat, and throughout their ministry, "because," he said, "where you are going, it is best to travel light."

So let's play with this metaphor of "traveling light." In Tim's case, I think he meant it is best not to be burdened by guilt, not to be dragging the detritus of fractured friendships in our wake, not to be indentured to the soreness we feel towards those who have criticized us or hurt us. Because, here is the thing: it's pretty hard to bear one another's burdens, if our own hands and heart are full.

Jesus, it seems to me, may have been saying something slightly different. He had to know that he was asking something difficult of the 70. He is sending them through Samaria, a province whose people would despise them, and for whom the 70 themselves would have had little respect. He is asking them to preach, to heal, to do battle with evil – activities at which they were novices, all. And he's telling them not to make plans for accommodation? Not to carry a bit of mad money? Not to prepare for the possibility that they might end up on the street?

Let us make no mistake: to travel light is to clothe yourself in vulnerability. Jesus recognizes this when he says, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. I'm not sure the 70 would have taken all that much comfort in the messianic promise that one day "the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them"!

Nevertheless, Jesus preferred the risk of traveling lightly to the safety of traveling encumbered. I suppose he could have run a semester's worth of tutorials, teaching the 70 to anticipate every single objection or hurdle they might encounter; he could have drilled them on various evasive and confrontational responses when people got in their faces. He could have loaded them down with pamphlets and other props betokening their authority. Why, he could have let *me* pack their bag for them. They'd have been ready for anything! But you know what? They'd still be on the road, lugging all that stuff over rutted paths and rugged hills. The truth is, you can't protect yourself against every eventuality, and if you try, you'll spend most of your life missing life. Your life will be like a labyrinthine bureaucracy which, for all its "equipment," is simply not equipped for simplicity, not equipped to respond nimbly, or to adapt to the happy or hapless curves life throws us. Surely it is better to be like young David, carrying nothing but five pebbles and a slingshot, than the great Goliath buried under the weight of armour and javelin.

Similarly, Jesus advises the 70 to "carry no purse." A purse (and here, we continue to play with this image of traveling lightly) is like a basement or a garage. It is a place for accumulating stuff, lots of stuff – and frankly, as you will know if you've ever had to move or downsize, most of it not very useful. Jesus is saying, This mission I am giving you, this life I have given you to live, is a great deal more about what you yourself give to it than you can receive from it. And you will be surprised when you give unstintingly and freely of yourself, the extent to which you will be blessed in return. The best blessings are not the ones you can carry about in a wallet. Life isn't about seeing who can accumulate the most toys before they die. Because the more toys you have, the harder it is to carry them with you.

No, my friends. Tim Foley spoke in the spirit of Jesus when he told those ordinands, "Where you are going, it is best to travel light."