

MARK 6.7-13
AN EXPOSITION FOR THE EIGHTH
SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 2003

God's Work and Ours

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- “...Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits.”⁸ He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff- no bread, no bag, no money in their belts-⁹ *but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics.*
- ¹⁰ *And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there.*
- ¹¹ *And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”*
- ¹² *So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent.*
- ¹³ *And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.*

God's work and ours

Did you notice in the Gospel today that Jesus told his disciples to take nothing with them—no food, no money, no extra clothing? Travel in Jesus' time was dangerous; the land was harsh, and travelers often were preyed upon by robbers. Yet, Jesus told his disciples to take no food, money, or extra clothing with them. He said this for at least two reasons. First, the custom of the day dictated that

if a stranger, a traveler, came to the door, the homeowner was to be totally hospitable, furnishing them food, drink, and a warm, safe place to stay. The traveler's physical needs would be taken care of by these strangers since it was a serious breach of etiquette not to care for the stranger. Indeed, Jesus tells the disciples that if they are mistreated “to shake off the dust on your feet as a testimony against those who would not extend hospitality.” Consequently, the traveler could travel lightly, knowing that others—in the name of hospitality—would take care of their needs.

Jesus tells his disciples to rely on others. This is extremely difficult for modern Americans to do. One of the basic characteristics of Americans is self-reliance. Since the beginnings on this continent, people have had to rely on themselves for all of their needs. When the white settlers came from Europe, they could not rely on Europe to supply them with what they needed—Europe was three months away across the waters of the Atlantic.

When settlers expanded westward, they separated themselves from civilization, and, again, had to rely on themselves. Americans for centuries have been taught to take care of themselves and their family. Self-reliance is one of the fundamental virtues of the American. Jesus' admonition to take nothing with them and rely on the hospitality of strangers flies against the way Americans have been raised.

Yet, this frame of mind that we call, 'self-reliance' has a down-side spiritually. Self-

reliance, spiritually, may cause us to lose sight of how much of our salvation is 'God's Work'.

St. Paul, in his epistle to the Romans describes salvation as a work of God.¹

To accomplish our salvation, God Himself made sacrifices. In fact, without His Poverty, as the apostle Paul puts it, we would not be saved. *...For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.*²

Any poverty the Apostles would experience would serve as an object lesson to them of the experience of Christ who was the supreme apostle - for the word apostle means 'sent', and it was Christ who was sent by God, into this world to take away our sins and provide for our forgiveness, by being executed on a cross for those sins. This is why we speak of salvation as being God's work. For when God's Son carried that cross, He was doing the work that we could not and would not want to do. God's work was 'tasting death for every man' and rising from the dead in order to provide pardon and justification before God for you and me.

... we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹ Romans 14.20

² 2 Corinthians 8.9

*¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.*³

Was 'taking nothing for the journey' and going without staff, bag, bread and money a taste of suffering? Yes. But it was also a taste of what Christ Himself was doing. It was a taste of **God's work**.

By being sent, as Christ's apostles were sent, we too are working. Our work is to go out, sent by God, to testify to God's work.

I think there was another reason why Jesus told them not to be concerned about their own physical needs. Jesus did not want the disciples to be concerned at all about worldly things. He wanted them to be able to concentrate totally on the spiritual. If they were thinking of worldly comforts, they could not allow the Holy Spirit to fill them with the power of Christ's love.

Undoubtedly, they themselves had to be filled with that love in order to pass it on to others.

Perhaps our lives are so loaded down, that all of the things in our lives distract us from God's work and ours. All of us are loaded down with the baggage of life: concerns about money, concerns about health, concerns about relationships, and

³ Hebrews 2.9

concerns about the job. Even the news media contributes to our burdens by focusing our eyes on the issues of the American troops in Iraq, or American troops possibly going to Liberia. As always, we are reminded that we should be concerned about conflict across the globe from Palestine to North Korea.

I could continue this litany of baggage with which we are all faced, but there is no need. We are fully aware of the baggage that surrounds us and occupies more of our time than we would wish.

As I was thinking about today's sermon, I was reminded of the ghost of old Jacob Marley, in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. When Jacob first appears to Scrooge, he has a huge chain wrapped around him. The chain was full of cash boxes, locks, ledger books, and keys to property. All of these items represented Jacob's baggage; it represented all of those things that occupied his time; it represented those things that prevented him from being concerned about his spiritual nature, about others. Like Jacob, we all carry baggage that prevents us from becoming the kind of people God would have us be. It was too late for Jacob; he could not rid himself of the baggage. We can.

Yes, we can eliminate the baggage that prevents us from being what we could become. We can turn that baggage over to God and allow Him to take care of it for us. I can tell you that it is not easy, because we are so prone to thinking that we can take care of it ourselves. But can we? If we can take care of all of that baggage by ourselves, why do we still

suffer under its weight? Turn it over to God; He will take it from us willingly.

I recently heard about an interview on TV with the mother of a murder victim. The mother indicated that because of her family, friends, and her faith, she was able to continue. These are the same sources that most of us turn to when life's disasters come our way. The mother then said that she just hoped that the murderer would receive justice. That is something that, again, most of us would want. I happened to think, though, that it was unfortunate that the mother had to concern herself with justice for the murderer. That desire for justice becomes her baggage; she carries it with her, and probably will continue to do so for years. It is a virtue to care, but it is a sin to worry. And, ironically, worry is the sin of caring too much.

It seems we only have so much capacity to take things in. The rest is just a distraction in our lives and detracts from our Christian walk. Think, if you will, about an empty sponge; place that sponge into a bucket of dirty water; let it absorb as much as it wants. Then move the sponge to a second bucket containing clean water. Put that sponge filled with dirty water into the clean water, and it will absorb none of the clean water. There just isn't room. We are the same; fill us with the negative, with the concerns of this life, and we have no room to absorb God's grace.

We have to make a major decision: Do we fill our being with the concerns of the daily life, or do we want to leave some room for the spiritual to fill us? We know that the concerns of the daily world can pull

us down into the depths. It is the spiritual concerns that can lift us to glorious heights. Which do we want? There is not room for both. We have to choose one or the other as being more important.

Throughout the centuries groups of men and women would set themselves away from the world in monasteries so that they could attain a closer relationship to God. I think we can see that these people—removed from the world, removed from the baggage of the world—had a marvelous opportunity to empty themselves of the worldly and fill it with thoughts of God and His desires for us. Unfortunately, we can't separate ourselves from the world; unlike the monks, we have to live here and that world becomes a huge part of our lives. So we spend our lives trying to rid ourselves of that baggage, and really seldom are we able achieve it.

When we are trying to bring more spiritual into our lives, probably the most we can expect to achieve is to separate ourselves from the world and its baggage for a short while. During that short period, we need to do everything possible to fill ourselves with God's love. We need to feel the depth of that love so that we make more and more effort to increase those few minutes to more minutes, and those minutes into hours.

Emptying our minds of the worldly is extremely difficult. How do we separate ourselves from the worries of life: Do we have enough money to pay all the bills? Can I afford to buy all of my medicines this month? How do I deal with those neighbors who make me so angry? How do I teach my children what they need to

know in order to live in this world? The list of worries—the baggage—goes on and on. It is so easy to let these worries zap us of our time and our energy—leaving nothing for the spiritual life that nurtures us. We need to make a conscious effort—set aside time in our daily lives when we will not allow the thoughts of the world to dominate our minds.

It has been an interesting exercise to move into a new house and live out of a suitcase and then out of boxes for a while. That experience has unintentionally brought me into contact with the dynamics behind Jesus' insistence that His disciples go without much of the gear that they might have depended upon. Being without many of my belongings taught me what it is like to be reliant upon the love and care of others. The exercise of throwing away much accumulated rubbish in my life is perhaps supposed to teach me something from today's Gospel reading – to help me better understand **God's work and ours.**

The apostle Paul learned this lesson and he recommends it to us as we, sent by God, seek to proclaim Christ.

'...Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,

⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above

every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee
should bow, in heaven and on earth and
under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ
is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always
obeyed, so now, not only as in my
presence but much more in my absence,
work out your own salvation with fear
and trembling,
¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to
will and to work for his good pleasure'.⁴
Amen.

¹ Romans 14.20

² 2 Corinthians 8.9

³ Hebrews 2.9

⁴ Philippians 2.5-12

⁴ Philippians 2.5-12