

“No Bread, No Bag, No Money”

Mark 6:1-13

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What we have in Mark, Chapter Six, is a freshman level course in mission engagement. Call it Missions 101. Students who take this class will end up giving it a different title; they'll refer to Missions 101 affectionately as “No bread, no bag, no money in your belt.”

This brief scene where Jesus sends the twelve out on a weekend mission internship is packed with sound advice, wise council. Whether one is headed off on a mission trip with Habitat for Humanity, or taking the first step toward being a literacy volunteer, or serving a meal at the South Park Inn, or accepting a term on the board of directors of the Salvation Army, or volunteering as a counselor at summer camp; there is instruction here worth noting. Since South Church has an historic reputation for being a church in mission, you might say this text, this course in Missions 101 is a text for all of us to know well.

The sermon this morning is really an overview of the curriculum for this freshman level course. The very first thing we learn is that Jesus “calls” the disciples for this work. To be called is to have a sense that God’s hand is upon me; that if I were to turn away from this work, God would track me down and hound me until I had agreed to participate. You know it’s a calling when God keeps you up at night. Dating back to the pastorate of Ted Hoskins in the 1960’s, South Church members have said things like, “You know, it just feels like the hand of God is upon us, to do this outreach work.” Like those first twelve, many of us are feeling that same “call” to make our lives matter for Christ’s sake.

The second thing we see is that mission work can be very lonely if attempted alone. Jesus sends the disciples out in pairs for this reason. It's not for security. It's not due to any marketing research. It's because mission work is lonely when it's attempted as a solo endeavor. After my second year of academics in seminary, I took a one year internship in rural South Dakota on a Lakota Sioux Indian reservation. Among other things, I encountered an unapologetic racism. Caucasian people and Indian people living in the same town, attending the same school, shopping at the same store didn't like each other, didn't love each other, didn't worship together, didn't trust each other.

When I returned to the seminary for the final year of study, I registered for a course with Max Stackhouse on Christian Ethics. I was determined to equip myself to take on the evils of racism. My term paper was a treatise on how I was going to go back to that reservation, and I was going to do this and I was going to propose that. When I got the paper back, I had never seen so many red pencil marks. Everywhere I had typed the first person singular pronoun, "I" Dr. Stackhouse had written the first person plural "WE." I got the message! Mission is not done alone, always in partnership, always the church people working together, not one person out there acting as a martyr. I have always been deeply moved by that line in the Frost poem, "I shan't be gone long; you come too."

The next thing we see in the text is that Jesus allows the disciples to carry a staff, a walking stick really. I have one here. This one was carved by George Tono whose shop is between Salima and Senga Bay on the Malawi lakeshore road. In Chichewa, we call it, 'ndodo.' I like to carry my 'ndodo' when I am walking there because the ground is uneven and it keeps me steady on my feet. I think Jesus had a slightly different reason in mind. I think Jesus knew that mission work causes one to tremble.

When you go out as Marie Calvin did a few years ago in a Land Rover made over as a mobile medical clinic and see people suffering with diseases we thought had been eradicated decades ago, it causes one to tremble. Or when you go to Baltimore as Dawn Otto did last week and strap on a dust mask and set foot into a row house you know will one day be someone's home, where someone will bake an apple pie, where someone will do algebra homework, where someone will fall in love, it causes one to tremble. When you step into the living room of a refugee family recently arrived from Bosnia to teach English as Barbara Barnes has done, it causes one to tremble. I think Jesus allowed the carrying of a staff because he just knows that loving another human being almost always causes you to tremble from head to toe. In addition to hard hats and tee shirts, we need to send our missionaries out with a sturdy 'ndodo.'

In the second half of the course, Missions 101, we discover we are to take no bread, no bag, no money in our purses! Imagine that! No bread! No bread sticks! No bread products! No luggage! No backpack! No fanny pack! No money! No checkbook! No ATM card! No traveler's checks! One might conclude that Jesus wanted the disciples to have an experience of self-deprivation, of poverty; an experience of survival, of seeing what they could get along without. But Jesus has something far more profound in mind, something beyond self-sacrifice. If these disciples are ever going to be effective in their mission work, they will have to catch the real meaning of hospitality. Without understanding hospitality, a mission is doomed from the start.

Hospitality is experienced when the one offering it and the one receiving it see in each other's face the face of Christ. It is a charitable thing to drive over to Peter's Retreat and cook supper for the 25 people living there with AIDS.

But the hospitality begins when I look at Phillippe and see in his face the face of Christ. Until then, there is charity but not

hospitality. The hospitality deepens when Phillipe looks at me and sees the same Christ. Bread and bags and money are distractions from hospitality. If I have my own sandwich, my eyes focus on my own meal, but when I have to share my sandwich with another, there is a chance my eyes will meet the eyes of the other, and we will recognize the presence of God. If I have my own wad of cash, I'll be focused on guarding it, making sure someone hasn't picked my pocket, but if I have to rely on coins coming from another source, there is a chance my eyes will meet the eyes of the other, and we will know the presence of God. What Jesus is after, in this weekend internship of mission endeavor, is that his followers will see more than a hungry person, more than a naked neighbor, more than a thirsty traveler, more than a wounded worker; they will see in each one the very face of God. And that is the essence of mission.

Finally, we learn something about shaking the dust off our feet. Jesus is wise enough to know that not every mission excursion will be fruitful in the way we had imagined it would. This is the humility dimension of mission. Sometimes even well planned mission projects crumble to dust. Last summer, some of our senior high missionaries returned from Albany feeling like they had wasted a week of their lives. It just hadn't work out. Jesus instructs the disciples to not lose sleep over such disappointments, to brush the dust off their feet, and to keep trying, to keep on offering the gift of love as if love were all that mattered.

When I was in South Dakota last week, I rented a car at the Rapid City airport and I headed east on highway 212. Somewhere east of Mud Butte, on-coming drivers started waving at me through their windshields. This took me by surprise! But by the second or third wave, I remembered that this is a local custom out on the prairie.

Everyone waves to everyone. It's a sign that out here we're all neighbors. To not wave is considered a snobbish slighting. So, I

got with the program and commenced to wave at every passing motorist. By the time I reached Eagle Butte, I was a waving fool, waving at everything that moved. It felt very good to me; waving, considering everyone my neighbor.

When I landed at Bradley Field and headed toward Interstate 91 on route 20, I started waving at the cars coming at me at 70 miles per hour. Not one driver waved back! Not one! Even on route 17 in South Glastonbury, no one returned my friendly wave, my little announcement that we are all neighbors. Not one driver waved! But I tell you I was not deterred. I shook the dust off my feet and I kept on trying, kept on waving, kept on making that little pronouncement that in some mysterious way, which we'll never fully understand, we are all neighbors.

Well, if you have paid attention these past fifteen minutes, you have had the course, Missions 101. You can pick up your certificate at the door, or we can mail it to your home address. Either way, you now have a good insight into what Jesus had in mind the day he sent the disciples out on their first mission trip. This crash course in mission endeavor, I offer to you all in the greatest of hope! Amen!