

Baggage

Baggage...perhaps it was all the talk about the expected increase in travel for this weekend, especially in comparison to last year that was the focus of the media for the last week that had me thinking about baggage as I read the passage from Mark this week that made me notice some things I had not thought about in just the same way before. In both portions of this passage which seems at first to be about two things...there is an underlying sense of baggage...just as it seems that our nations and society is beginning to come to understand that we have a great deal of baggage that we have not addressed. All too often this is true in our personal lives as well as we let issues accumulate and do not address them so that they fester and then cause other things to create harm...baggage. As we watch the scenes of those travelers in airports with their rolling suitcases, it is easy to see the baggage that they are bringing with them on their trips but is it easy to identify the baggage from the past that we as individuals, as families, as communities, as a nation are carrying with us and how it is continuing to affect us and our actions in the present. Mark 6:1 begins by telling us Jesus left “that place and came to his hometown and his disciples followed him.” Jesus has been in the area around the Sea of Galilee and has gained quite a reputation; he has been teaching and healing and amazing people by what he had done; not only the marginalized but a leader of a synagogue has benefited from his compassionate actions. Now he returns to his hometown, which Mark does not name, although it will be named in Luke’s gospel. What is different here is that when Jesus comes to his hometown and goes to the synagogue to teach his reception is not that of someone who is doing great things in the region...Instead Mark speaks of the people’s amazement in a different sense. “They said, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?’” It seems that simply stepping forward to teach in his hometown synagogue was stepping out of his—and his families—assigned place in the village pecking order. He was not acting according to his assigned role in the hierarchy assigned to him according to the “way things always have been.” Anyone who has ever lived in a small community knows that maintaining one’s social standing is fiercely protected—and anyone upsetting the assigned place would immediately evoke critical evaluation by those in charge of keeping people in their place. The first comments included in Mark refer to factors that would increase a person’s honor or place in the society, while the later ones refer to the factors that establish lifelong inherited honor or standing. In Jesus’ time, wisdom, power, honor, all these things were understood to exist in a fixed and limited amount which was distributed unequally and given at birth, so any increase could only happen by being given—or taken from someone else. So the hometown folks are not in favor of giving up any of their supply or having it taken from them. That is why the later comments are to remind those who hear Jesus just who he is. The reference to “son of Mary” with no reference to his father would not so subtly remind everyone of the shaming gossip about Mary being pregnant before getting married. And who would believe the story that Mary tells about who the real father is? Poor thing. Even the reference to being a carpenter would also be a reminder that in Jesus’ time, carpenters often

had to be away from home in search of work—and this made them less than desirable as sons, husbands, fathers, and town residents. Who knows what happens when people are not under everyone’s watchful eyes? Their amazement is not wonder, but dubious suspicion. The baggage they carried about knowing Jesus’ history as a child has totally blinded them to the wonder of what he is. The growing up years of the boy Jesus are not recorded, not by any that are close to contemporary accounts of his life so his boyhood was probably unremarkable; yet his adulthood changed the world. Jesus’ response to their rejections was: “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” Mark concludes this section with something of an oxymoron: And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” Perhaps the only ones who did not notice any signs of healing happening were those who refused to admit that it was possible. There seems to be a problem in our midst today because people are denying things because they do not want them to be true...because of the baggage they carry in their hearts, because of past misunderstandings, because of past mis-information, because of past grievances. In all the narrations of healing, Jesus healings are for those who come to him and seek to be healed, therefore, it seems he was still able to heal those who sought to be healed. Jesus healed because of compassion and love and to demonstrate God’s love and mercy. Perhaps, those who came to him without carrying the baggage of who they believed he was because of what they thought his place in society should be were healed because they saw the love and acceptance waiting for them in his presence. Mark tells us that Jesus in turn was amazed at the “unbelief” of those who had known him in the past; that they could not see beyond that baggage that they carried; they could not be open to what was possible and was happening before their eyes. Jesus does not carry the baggage of their rejection with him when he leaves because he then leaves his hometown to continue his tour of the villages teaching as he goes. But Mark tells us that Jesus then begins to expand what he is doing by sending out his disciples. He begins by not only sending them out in pairs, he also gives them “authority over the unclean spirits” and sends them out with the same message he is proclaiming. His orders are framed this way: “Take nothing for your journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in your belts; but wear sandals and only one tunic. When you enter a house, stay there until you leave the village. If any village will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” Sending his disciples out in pairs is both a way to make his ministry more widely available and to test their readiness for ministry. The sending in pairs is also done for a couple of other valid reasons: it is and was dangerous to travel alone, and because having a partner helps to provide encouragement and accountability in the doing of the task. The minimal possessions listed here was normal practice in Jesus’ time for itinerant ministers. But the lack of baggage that the disciples were to carry indicates something else. Jesus during his life on earth was always on the move, and it seems he expected his disciples to follow this pattern as well. They were expected to be on the move; never to get too comfortable in one place, and not to be on the lookout for the nicest home but content with whatever accommodations were offered. This could be applied the church as well, that Jesus expects it to be on the move as well, not to get too comfortable with the way things are but to always be seeking and on the move with the

message he gave to his followers. The lack of baggage to be carried by Jesus' followers extends to the metaphorical baggage we tend to pick up as well. "Shake the dust off your feet." Just as Jesus evidently was able to shake off the rejection by his hometown and continue to spread and even expand his efforts, so we too need to "shake off the baggage" we tend to pick up mentally and spiritually as we go through life. It may be difficult to keep our packing light in this sense, but letting go of the baggage of cynicism, contempt, anger, fear and just plain fatigue is what we need to do in order to keep on moving in the direction Jesus wants us to go. Jesus was rejected, questioned, and judged in his hometown. He did what he could and when he could do no more he went into other towns. He kept moving. He kept proclaiming. He kept healing, casting out demons, confronting evil, calling out oppressors and alleviating suffering. And he enabled others to do the same thing. Others acceptance was not a prerequisite for his ministry. It cannot be for ours either. Just as Jesus gave instructions to those first twelve, he gives us instructions, a packing list and even more, a commandment: love one another. Keep moving, keep praying, and keep working on identifying any baggage you may have picked up along the way which may interfere with carrying out the mission you have been called into: being a disciple given the task to bring good news to the world, announcing God's love and grace for all. Notice the beauty and good trouble along the way, but don't forget as the Apostle Paul wrote the grace of your baptism is sufficient for your journey and calling because it is God's grace. And because it is God's grace it is so sufficient in fact you don't need to haul any baggage, literal or metaphorical, with you at all. Just go out into the world to show the love of Jesus Christ; let those with ears to hear, listen, and those who can't, well, shake off the dust, and keep going. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.