

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 18, 2017
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Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35—10:23

Speaking for myself at least, I'm feeling a bit relieved this morning. Liturgists sometimes call this green time of the year "ordinary time." Now technically, "ordinary" is about "ordinal numbers"; it means these weeks are "ordered" and numbered, so today is Proper 6, the Second Sunday after Pentecost. For most of us, though, "ordinary" time means we're not celebrating holy days or observing special seasons. And that's why I'm feeling relieved this morning.

It feels good to take a break from the special days; I'm glad to relax into the ordinary routines and to settle into taking our time to tell once more the stories of our faith over the course of the next weeks and months. So we'll be reading from Genesis for most of the summer. We'll be working our way through Paul's letter to the Church in Rome for 14 weeks. We've been reading other gospel accounts for the past several weeks, but we're back into the Gospel according to Matthew today – and that's where we'll stay (at least for the most part) for the rest of the year.

But there are just a couple of problems with the idea that we can relax and settle into ordinary time this morning. In the first place, there's nothing ordinary about the stories we tell whenever we gather here. They really are, by definition, inherently extraordinary. And, secondly, these stories we hear – at least this morning – don't encourage us to sit back and take our ease.

Abraham, it seems, was taking it easy until he looked up and saw three strangers come along. A flurry of activity follows. Abraham "runs" to greet these guests, and then he "hastens" to tell Sarah to "quickly" whip up something to serve them. And then he "runs" to the herd and picks out a calf, giving it to a servant who "hastens" to throw it on the grill!

So, if Abraham is our exemplar, showing us what gracious hospitality looks like, we'd all better get crackin'!

There's so much more I'd like to say about that extraordinary story from Genesis, but there's another extraordinary story for us in this morning's gospel, as well. And there's no rest for the disciples there (either). We're coming a bit into the middle of all our readings this morning. As for the gospel, Jesus has been busy before we pick up the story this morning. A hint of what all he's been doing is given us in the first verse:

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.

And then Jesus stops ... just for a moment, I think, but long enough to look out over the crowds. There are always those in the world with position and power and clout; they can take care of

themselves. Jesus looks out and sees the others, “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” He sees those no one is looking out for. And he has compassion for them. Literally, what Jesus sees hits him in the gut; it breaks his heart.

So he turns to his disciples and he tells them that there’s just too much for him to do alone. He needs help. He tells them to pray for laborers who can pitch in and lend a hand. And then, before they’ve even had a chance to bow their heads to pray, Jesus tells them that they are themselves the answer to the prayer. And he sends them out and gives them marching orders, telling them to do pretty much the same things he himself had been doing.

And if they are our exemplars, showing us what it looks like to pray for a better world, we’d better get up off our knees and get at it!

Go out, Jesus says, “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts ...” Leave a change of clothes behind. In short, Jesus tells them to travel lightly.

Whenever I hear these instructions, I remember some advice from Rick Steves. For anyone who might not know who he is, Rick Steves is a writer and public television personality, a “travel guru” who has made a living by traveling the world. He preaches and teaches others how to do the same. His philosophy of travel is to pack light and right. This is what he says:

The importance of packing light cannot be overemphasized, but, for your own good, I’ll try. You’ll never meet a traveler who, after five trips, brags: “Every year I pack heavier.” The measure of a good traveler is how light he or she travels. You can’t travel heavy, happy, and cheap. Pick two.

He goes on to say that he limits himself to one carry-on size bag, no more than 20 pounds. And he offers advice on how anyone can do the same. He has a website, of course. You can go online and print out a suggested packing list. He discusses the pros and cons of wheeled bags versus backpacks. “How do you fit a whole trip’s worth of luggage into a carry-on bag?” he asks. “The answer is simple: Bring very little.”

Don’t pack for the worst-case scenario. Pack for the best-case scenario and simply buy yourself out of any jams. Bring layers rather than take a heavy coat. Think in terms of what you can do without — not what will be handy on your trip. When in doubt, leave it out. I’ve seen people pack a whole summer’s supply of deodorant or razors, thinking they can’t get them there. The world is getting really small: You can buy Dial soap, Colgate toothpaste, Nivea cream, and Gillette razors in Sicily and Slovakia. ... If you can’t find one of your essentials, ask yourself how half a billion Europeans can live without it. Rather than carry a whole trip’s supply of toiletries, take enough to get started and look forward to running out of toothpaste in Bulgaria. Then you have the perfect excuse to go into a Bulgarian department store, shop around, and pick up something you think might be toothpaste.

“You can’t travel heavy, happy, and cheap.” But it’s not, he says, just about saving money.

Too much luggage marks you as a typical tourist. It slams the Back Door shut. Serendipity suffers. Changing locations becomes a major operation ... With only one bag, you’re mobile and in control. ⁱ

That’s Rick Steves’ philosophy about travel ... and, I think, it’s his philosophy about life. He fervently believes that travel – and life – done his way, is a richer experience. And I think Jesus might agree. He tells the disciples to go into a town or village and stay wherever someone welcomes them in and not to look further for a place with all the amenities they might wish they had. There’s a freedom in going forth and “doing without,” in learning how little we really need, in discovering the grace that is to be found in another at every turn.

There is, however, one thing Jesus tells the disciples not to leave behind ... their peace.

As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.

Sam Portaro, an Episcopal priest and writer, says it’s a critically-important detail:

... when we lose [our peace], when we leave it carelessly behind, we are bereft of that which we need for mediating, reconciling. So Jesus instructs the disciples to take care of that peace – offer it where worthy, where it is valued, praised, accepted. But they are to take it with them when they leave the unworthy places, where their peace is assaulted, devalued, demeaned, or denied. They are not to leave behind the primary tool of their ministry.

We have all lost our peace at some time or another. We carry animosities and grudges, prejudices, and angers, often packed in those spaces where our peace once was. We have ... lost our finely-honed edge of peace, our delicately calibrated equanimity, left it behind in the wreckage of some old, ugly argument where it remains. We left it where it is not valued, where it lies out in the rain and wind, growing dull and useless. Is it any surprise that when we need ... that peace, we find it missing? We reach for it and find it gone.

... If we leave our peace scattered upon a hundred angry hillsides, it will not be at hand when we need it, as we do so often ... ⁱⁱ

That’s wisdom for how to live in these ordinary days.

So much of what goes on in the world around us breaks the heart of the divine. So let us get on with the work that is ours to do. Travel lightly upon this earth as you go, and never let anyone else take from you the peace that is yours. “Don’t leave home without it!”

ⁱ Rick Steves @ <https://www.ricksteves.com/travel-tips/packing-light/packing-smart>.

ⁱⁱ Sam Portaro on George Augustus Selwyn, in *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (Cowley Publications, Boston, mass, 1998), pp. 77-78.