

## 2024 Proper 9B (recycle)

True confessions time: I took a vacation day to go with the holiday this week, and when it came time to write a sermon I wasn't getting anywhere. So I'm recycling one from a few years ago, and I hope it speaks to you.

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There is a photograph of me as a very young child, which I have labeled "Nancy on the Go." In it I am probably around two. I have an old purse of my mother's slung around my neck, a lunch box in my hand, remnants of my lunch (looks like it might have been peanut butter and jelly) smeared on my shirt, and a confident, somewhat sassy look on my face. (Oh, what I'd give for that curly hair again!) I was ready to be on the move!

I realize I have always conflated this photo, which was clearly taken in warm weather, and a story my mother shares about the winter day when I decided to "go visit my friend Susie." I knew she lived in the house on the curve of our road, not far from us but on the other side of the street. My mom laughs to describe the sight of my brother Bud lifting his knees almost up to his ears as he raced across the snow to cut me off before I could come to any danger, and how indignant I was when he lifted me up and carried me back to the house.

Did I mention Susie was my *imaginary* friend?

For some reason, that photo of me comes to mind sometimes when we have this story of Jesus sending the disciples out with only sandals on their feet and a walking stick. He wanted them to travel light—something I'm just not that good at. I always pack more than I need, even for a short trip of just a couple of nights away.

I don't know that I'm all that good at traveling light in the metaphorical sense, either. There's always some bit of baggage—some old resentment, or some armor to shield myself from imagined adversaries, or an unrealistic expectation—that I bring along.

Jesus had just encountered a whole lot of baggage from the community he had always called home. This is his first public appearance there since he had begun his public ministry. (This differs in the various gospels, so if you're having a vague memory of us talking about him reading from Isaiah and declaring "today this has been fulfilled in your midst" you aren't really wrong, you're just in the Gospel of Luke. We're all over here in Mark.)

By this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has healed people, taught parables, calmed the storm, exorcised demons, raised the dead, argued with religious leaders...and only now is he "going public" in his own hometown community.

And boy oh boy is there a lot of baggage!

Notice the words they use to describe Jesus. We have inherited a tradition that Jesus was a 'carpenter' but the actual word in Greek, *tekton*, can mean any number of trades involving the use of one's hands, back, and sweat. One of those is mason or bricklayer, and I can't help but wonder if that wasn't supposed to be a throwback to the status of the slaves in Egypt, who made bricks for Pharaoh.

Whatever it was Jesus actually did, it was clearly not of a sufficiently high status for these people. Add to that the reference to Jesus as *Mary's* son, rather than naming his father... We don't get an infancy narrative in Mark; there is no lovely story of an angel announcing his birth to Mary or telling Joseph it will be okay for him to claim Jesus as his own child. This is the raw, blunt narrative of the Gospel of Mark. Anyone hearing Jesus described as the son of *Mary* rather than the son of *Joseph* would immediately know that there was something scandalous about his parentage.

Another point of dishonor, in a society where your reputation was the currency of real value. Why should they listen to this illegitimate raw knuckled nobody? Why should they believe any of those stories of healings and exorcisms and miracles?

There was just too much baggage.

The text says that Jesus *couldn't* perform any of his wonders—later Gospels will modify that to say he didn't, without suggesting he was incapable of it. I suspect Mark's wording may be closer to the truth. He was not able to make a difference in their lives, because they weren't ready to hear it.

This makes sense, really, if you understand that the point of these miraculous events is not just the present moment. They were meant to declare the coming of God's kingdom among them. If the people weren't even willing to see them as miracles for a particular situation, they were definitely not going to be open to a bigger picture, a bigger story.

So what does Jesus do?

Does he get indignant and kick and fight and pout?

No. He moves on.

He goes back out onto the road, to find the places where the people don't hold his past—or his mother's past or father's occupation—against him. He models for the disciples the very thing he then tells them to do: enter a town. If they make space for them, stay and share the good news. If they don't want to hear it, don't waste your energy trying to change their minds. Shake the dust off your feet and move on.

That requires a fair bit of humility, I think, and a whole lot of detachment from expectations. It reshapes what ‘success’ will look like—no longer bound to certain outcomes, but only to faithfulness and trust.

In a way it embodies the thing Paul will write many years later, “[God’s] grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness...when I am weak, then I am strong.”

It reminds us that sometimes we feel weak because we are trying to carry things we really need to drop, leave behind. We need to travel light—light in possessions, sure, but also light in expectations, light in judgment (of both self and others).

One of my favorite quotations of G.K. Chesterton is “Angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly.” I daresay something similar is true about disciples. Not that they can fly, necessarily, but that they are able to follow Jesus because they’ve learned to drop a lot of unnecessary baggage along the roadside as they go.

I want to go back to that photo of me as a child. For years all I have ever paid attention to is the stuff I’m carrying, and the messy smear on my shirt. But when I took another look at it in preparation for this sermon, I discovered something else.

That look of joy and confidence and determination in that little face. That is a child who knows she is loved, not just by the person holding the camera, but by the One who created her.

Over the course of my life, it is the times when I let *that* person shine through when I have been most effective in sharing the love of God, and inviting others to join me on the way.

Sticky shirt, crazy hair, and all.

Amen.