

What are you carrying?

Luke 13:10-17

November 20, 2011

All of us carry things with us through every day of our lives. Some of those things are consciously with us: today's "to-do" list of errands and pick up times and other things to get done. Some of those things run at a deeper, less conscious level: old wounds and sources of grief, the unfinished business from our pasts. There is a cumulative weight to all the things that we carry that shapes how we go through a day, that shapes how we experience life.

Take a minute and imagine that instead of carrying all of these things in our hearts and minds, in ways that are invisible to one another, for a day, we would carry all these things literally in a backpack strapped to our backs. You might see the people around you differently. That person who is just annoying you at the grocery store might strike you differently if you saw the size of the pack that she carried. That person who you've always been so impressed with might be seen in a different light if you saw how tiny his pack is. You might even look in the mirror and be struck by the size of your own pack: "Wow, I had no idea I was carrying all this stuff!" Or maybe you might look and wonder, "Gee, I've carried so much more before. Why am I struggling now?"

One of the many privileges of being a pastor and a therapist is that people tend to bring their packs with them when they come and talk to me. It is a high-trust moment for most people, if not right away then with a healthy trust that's built over time. Usually,

folks end up coming in because they're not sure that they can carry everything that they've been carrying any more. They need to pull the straps off their shoulders. They need to let it slump to the floor. For a while, they need to talk about how hard it has been to carry the load they've been carrying. They might need to search for the words to describe just how much their back and their knees and their shoulders hurt. Then, after a while, the question arises: "What in the world am I going to do with all this stuff?"

There are things that you can do. You can get better shoulder straps for that pack and make sure there is better support. (Maybe talking to someone is the beginning of widening those straps.) You can strengthen your back and your legs. (There's nothing like a little spiritual exercise in life.) If you really want to get serious, you can pull the top open on that pack and dump everything out on the floor and start to ask yourself, "What is really necessary to carry here? What can I let go of? What do I need to bring with me?" (Of course, some of the heaviest things we carry are the hardest things to let go of--the things that happened years ago that are never going to change but just seem to grow heavier with every day we cling to them.) The work of sorting what's in the pack can be one of the most liberating experiences a person can have. ("Really, I don't have to carry this guilt any more?") It is also deadly serious, hard work.

Ultimately, if I have done a good sort, I might get to the point of carrying less unnecessary stuff with me in life, though I don't think any of us ever fully liberate ourselves from all the unneeded weight. What I have to do then, though, is learn how to pack the pack in a balanced way. You don't want the sharp pointy stuff

poking you in the back. You don't want the heaviest stuff on top. You want a pack that distributes the weight. It will still be heavy. It will still be hard work. (As my mother used to say to me, growing up, "That's the way life is!") However, you wouldn't believe the difference that knowing what's in the pack and why it is there and knowing that the pack is packed correctly can make.

The other thing we tend to learn along the way is the limited set of ways that we can help each other with our packs. In the end, we probably have to carry whatever is ours to carry. Much as I might like to, I can't carry your load for you. I can stand and hold your pack up for you while you put it on. I can suggest that maybe we both sit down for a while and take a break and when we do, I can help you put your pack down. Most importantly, we can walk beside each other and keep each other company while we carry what's ours to carry. However, in the end, I can't do your work for you and you can't do mine.

Lately, I've been struck by how many people are carrying a really heavy load. We're three years into a bad recession. Worrying about the bills or college tuition are a heavy load. Whether I've lost my job or I go to work each day wondering if today is the day I will or it's my job to tell someone that they just lost their's, those can be crushing loads. That magical number known as "the age at which I can retire" keeps receding farther into the unknown. And if I have children, it's hard not to wonder what kind of world will be left for them. Add to these real issues a 24/7 news cycle that feeds our worst fears and we can marvel that our knees haven't just buckled from the weight.

And yet, what I keep running into in our little church and in our tiny town is brave people, people who keep putting one foot in front of another, people who have learned how to focus on the next step. People around here seem to understand that once you've done what you can do to lighten your load and carry only what you need to carry, once you've packed the pack the right way, the remaining danger is that you can talk yourself right out of doing what you're capable of doing. Because you can't see around the corner up ahead, because you can't say with authority what tomorrow holds, it is awfully tempting to imagine the worst, to operate based on fear. And the sad truth is that when fear takes over, we're pretty much done. Sooner or later, the question is, "Do I have the focus and the discipline to simply take the next step?"

And, of course, we don't ask that question in a vacuum. We walk through life with dear friends and beloved families. Most of the time, those people are one of God's greatest blessings. Some days, though, they are the chorus that feeds our fears. Some days, we are a part of the chorus that feeds theirs'. You see, what happens when you carry a lot of weight is you learn to lean into it. You cock your head "just so." And when we are "dialed in" like that, our field of vision gets limited. Suddenly, we don't see things the same way as the people we love most because we're all struggling to keep going. We all have our own limited vision fields. When we don't seem to be seeing things the same way, it seems so easy to get at odds. It's so easy to just end up bent over and in pain and all alone.

Bent over and in pain and alone was precisely the life that the woman in our text had come to know. For 18 years, she had been

bent over at the waist, unable to stand up. Everywhere she went, she stared at the ground beneath her, unable to make eye contact with a single person. Perhaps she was better off to not see the looks she got from those she met along the way--the disparaging looks of judgment from those who were convinced that since everything that happened was God's will, "Well...this woman must have really done something bad to make God that mad!" People cut a wide path around her because in their eyes she was cursed.

On the day when Jesus met her, she was at the synagogue, sadly, the last place in the world she could expect to be welcomed. First, the religious authorities were the ones who taught that illnesses and disabilities were God's way of passing judgment. She certainly wasn't going to find any empathy there. Second, she was a woman traveling alone in a culture in which women who were strangers were not even to be talked to. Finally, if she had any expectations of any attempt at any sort of medical care, this was the sabbath and the sabbath was now all about the synagogue and worship, certainly not for something as secondary as caring for a suffering human being!

After 18 years, I'm pretty certain this woman had read the "memo" on all those rules. And yet, she went anyway. When she arrives, she meets Jesus. When Jesus sees her, he calls her to him. That's the first rule that he breaks: he talks to a woman who is a stranger. It's also a break from the more normal story of so many of Jesus' healings. Usually, the person in need cries out to Jesus or comes to him or just reaches out and grabs for his robe. This time, Jesus reaches out to her. When he does, she comes to him. Jesus

is moved by her terrible plight. He speaks simple words: “Woman you are set free from this ailment.”

That’s the second rule Jesus breaks. He heals on the sabbath. No one is supposed to work on the sabbath (except the religious authorities and all the other people who had enough clout to be granted exceptions to the “rules” so that their lives could be easier than everyone else or so that they could make a buck.) The authorities go crazy! “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day!” Meanwhile, the woman who has been liberated from her pain and her struggle stands up straight and begins praising God!

Jesus breaks the third rule when he talks back to the authorities in front of the crowds. He calls them hypocrites. He points out how much more they care for their donkeys on the sabbath than they care for this poor woman. He dares to call the woman “a daughter of Abraham,” in a world that spoke freely of the “sons of Abraham” but never would have imagined using Jesus’ words. He screams to them that this woman has been freed from bondage (oh...say...like all their ancestors in Egypt had been freed!) and all they can feel is anger. The crowd goes crazy as the authorities are put to shame. And the authorities gather themselves in secret to begin to plot Jesus’ arrest.

Jesus gives the woman a chance in life, a chance to walk tall and straight, a chance to truly see the world around her, a chance to make eye contact with the people she meets along the way. Was her life all easy from that point on? Of course not! No one’s life is easy. (As I said earlier, “That’s the way life is.”) She was still a

single woman. She was probably now a target for the authorities, as well, since she was Jesus' coconspirator on this day. Yet, what Jesus gave her was a chance to walk through her life with dignity and respect. From that day on, she carried herself differently and she carried what she needed to carry in her pack with a different bounce in her step.

Maybe that's what we get to do in life--walk with dignity and respect and offer dignity and respect to the people we meet along the way. What if there is not a challenge in this life that can take that dignity and respect away? It is our responsibility to pay attention to what we are carrying and how we are carrying it. It is also our job to stay open to the presence of a God who loves us and who cares for us and who wants nothing more than for us to walk straight and tall? What if our job together is to simply support each other as we can and to walk with each other and remind each other that God is with us, regardless of whether the next step is hard or easy?