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“Things to Take Along”

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10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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1 Kings 17:8–24; Ps. 146; Gal. 1:11–24; Lk. 15:11–24

Eternal God, once again we read stories that stretch our imaginations, stories that often seem too good to believe, stories about your presence in our world and in our lives. Open our hearts and minds that hearing, we may believe, and believing we may follow Christ our Lord. In His name, we pray. Amen.

When you are getting ready to leave home, it is difficult to decide what to take. No matter how carefully you pack, you always leave something essential behind, something you knew you would need that you meant to take. There is a tendency to take too much, of which I am quite guilty. Carlisle and I have been working at this for the forty-seven years that we have been married. She is making some progress with me. She will ask me questions like, “Do you think you really will need this? Will you wear that? Do you want to pay for another suitcase?” These are little hints and reminders.

Carlisle has taught me a lot about traveling light, and I am grateful to her for that, along with many other things. I was thinking about this matter as we returned from a trip to Russia where I took just enough. I was also thinking of it as we were getting ready to celebrate with the young people graduating from high school. What will you carry with you when you leave high school and start preparing for the next stage of your life? Let’s think about it this morning. The rest of you are welcome to listen in.

You will hear a lot of advice in the next few days as people tell you the way to have a successful and good life, and I believe the church should have a shot at it because you are a part of the life and ministry of this congregation.

You will need a map and a compass—maybe a GPS, to be more modern. A real map and compass or a real GPS is not a bad idea, but you have probably figured out that I am talking in symbols. You need things to help you find your way. There are a lot of people, peers, professors, friends and parents who have ideas about how and where you should go. Many of those ideas are helpful, but it may not be the exact way you want to go and what you want to take and what you need for the journey.

For people of faith, we find our way in the world through stories we tell each other, poems we read (we call some of these poems Psalms), through hymns we sing together, through a shared vision of who we are and whose we are and what God has called us to do in the world. That helps us travel through this life. We have taught them to you to help you navigate your way.

There was a young minister, a number of years ago, who took his first church out of seminary. It was in the Appalachia in Eastern Kentucky. Most of the people in that region worked in coal mines. It is a poor region, as many of you know, and many of their children couldn't wait until they got through with high school so they could get out of there.

The new minister had learned some new methods of Christian education when he was in seminary. When he got to his new congregation he was serving, at a meeting with the officers, he told them that he was going to propose they change the way they did Christian Education. They had been having the students memorize Scripture passages, learn Bible stories. He said, "From now on, we're going to have more discussion, more conversations about doctrines and ideas and issues and less memory work."

A matriarch of the congregation listened patiently to his presentation and said to him, "I don't think we should make this change." "Why not?" asked the pastor.

“This is the newest trend. This is the way we’re being taught in seminary.” She replied, “Let me explain it to you this way. Very soon, many of our children will be leaving us. They will be moving on to big cities like Cincinnati, Louisville, Chicago. They’re going to find work or go to school. In the process, they will have some tough times and they will lose their way. They’ll become discouraged.

“And when they feel lost and alone, the only things they’ll have to guide them are what we taught them, like:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
For you are with me (Ps. 23:1, 4)*

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the
heart of the sea (Ps. 46:1–2)*

When the ground under your feet shakes, it is good to have something to stand on. We’ll keep teaching them Scripture.”

If you listen to the Scriptures as we do in this congregation, we’ll hear some strange stories in the Bible. How about the one Ian Gitata read for us this morning. It was one of the common Lectionary passages from the Old Testament for the day. I didn’t pick it; it was assigned. Elijah has been called by God to do God’s work. But there was a problem: Elijah has run out of gas—actually, he is out of food, out of energy. He is on empty—hungry—so he asked a poor woman, who actually is from another faith. She worshipped Baal for assistance. However, she does not have much but she agrees to share what she does have.

Elijah assures her that the God who sent him can be trusted and that there will be enough for her, her son, and Elijah. This story is important because there are times

when we are all empty. There are times when we need to find something to sustain us, and we're not sure where it's going to come from.

In this story, the person who God sent to help was a stranger, a poor woman from another faith. Yet, God provided. The story you see is about God, a God who is faithful and can be counted on, even if our help arrives in the person of a stranger of another faith.

When we are willing to trust God, the smallest, most ordinary action can produce the most life-changing and even history-changing results. Every day, we must learn to trust. Even if you don't remember the story or don't remember the names of the characters, remember that God can be trusted. That will take you a long way.

I want to call your attention to the picture in the front of the bulletin. It is a famous picture: Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. It is a story I chose to read this morning. It is not the Common Lectionary Gospel passage of the day—it's a preacher's prerogative that sometimes the lectionary can be changed.

Carlisle and I visited the Hermitage, one of the great museums in the world which is located in St. Petersburg, Russia. On the morning we got there, we got there very early, and the place was crowded. There were groups coming to go through this magnificent museum. Our guide said you can spend twelve years in the Hermitage and not see all the works of art. That is how big and vast it is. But if you have a good guide, this person will take you to see the things you want to see: the Impressionists and other important works of art. Our guide said, "We're going to go early to see Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* because that always attracts a huge crowd, even on days the museum is not full; there's a huge crowd there. People from all over the world want to see and stand in front of this picture. It is a beloved art work."

I contend it is not just the beauty of the art. I contend that the father welcoming the son home touches a chord deep inside all of us. Whether we speak Russian or Chinese or Spanish, it says to us, in ways that words cannot communicate: "We can go home again. No matter where you have been or what you have done, God has not given up on you. God is ready to welcome you back."

At the Men of Faith retreat this weekend, we talked about stability. We had a wonderful leader, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, who was working in the Walltown community and is also a good theologian and writer. At one point in his book, *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture*, he has this to say:

*The heart's true home—the foundation we long for—is a life rooted in the love of God. But this love is always God's mercy directed toward us before it is our response of trusting love. God offers us stability in the only thing that cannot fail—God's faithfulness itself.*¹

You see it in the picture of the father welcoming home the prodigal.

Someone once said that in the Christian faith, failure is not final. When you stumble and fall down, when you are going the wrong direction, when life has not worked out for you, that is not the end of the story. Look at the apostle, Paul. He said, “I was violently persecuting the Christians and the early church. But then Christ grabbed me and turned me around.” You can risk and fail, and God does not give up on you. You know how important it is to know this? It is essential to navigate your way in the world, to take along the picture by Rembrandt of the return of the prodigal.

This failure business is also represented in the cross. The cross in Jesus' day was the emblem of suffering and shame. But God redeemed it by raising Jesus from the dead, by saying this form of sacrificial love is God's way in the world. That's the way to live a happy, fulfilled life. It's not a matter of how many things you can accumulate. It's a matter of learning how to give up, to share, to follow God's lead in Jesus Christ.

I encourage you graduates and all of us to remember the primary lesson Jesus taught that we gain our lives when we give ourselves to something or someone bigger than ourselves. This is not easy. That's why we sing, “Lift high the cross.”

¹ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture*, Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010, p. 15

Lift high the cross and remember that the way of God's love is the way of hope, faith, and trust in the world. If you have learned nothing else from this congregation, I hope you have noticed that following the way of Christ, in giving of ourselves for others, the way of the cross is the way to fulfillment and joy. And I hope you've also learned that you matter to God and to us, and that God has something important for you to do with your life, for you to use those gifts that God has given you.

It matters what you do with your life.

Someone has put it this way:

Every act of love...: every work of art or music...; every minute teaching...; every act of care and nurture...; every prayer, every deed that spreads the gospel and builds up the church...all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. (N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope)

Every investment we make in others, no matter how small it may seem, gets us caught up in the purposes of God, just as that poor woman sharing bread with hungry Elijah was part of the healing and hope-giving presence of God in the world.

I guess by now, your backpack is getting a little heavy, right? You have some Psalms, a picture, a cross. Too much to carry? I hope not. I hope it will be what you need. I hope it will be enough so you will know as a friend of mine discovered this week in her hour of need, that wherever you go, wherever you wander, you are not alone. You are not alone! And you matter to God, and your life matters. Thanks be to God. Amen.