



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“The Things We Carry”

Mark 6:7-13

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First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day’s march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending....¹

Those are the first lines of *The Things They Carried*, a book written by Tim O’Brien. O’Brien has written many stories and books that reflect his experience as a soldier in the Vietnam War. In this book, he introduces us to the men of Alpha Company by naming things the soldiers carry in their rucksacks.

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities ... were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wrist watches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water.²

Once the necessities were accounted for, O’Brien tells us of other, discretionary items:

- Ted Lavender was scared; he carried tranquilizers.
- Norman Bowker carried a diary.
- Ray Kiley, comic books, brandy and M&Ms.
- Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament presented to him by his father, back home on the reservation in Oklahoma. He also carried his grandfather’s old hunting hatchet decorated with feathers.

What we choose to carry says a lot about who we are. When heading out into the world, what do you carry? What items can be found in your backpack or purse or pockets? I recently asked a group of Broadstreeters that question. Here are some of their answers:

- Phone
- Keys
- Credit card
- Glasses
- Money (“I never carry cash” another person said.)
- Driver’s license
- Photos
- “Dumb store cards”

¹ Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Penguin 1990).

² IBID.

- Watch
- Sunscreen
- Wedding ring
- Snacks
- Mints
- Medical bracelet

The most important things we carry can't be put into a backpack, pocket or purse. Again, Tim O'Brien:

They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down.

...They carried all they could bear and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.³

The most important things we carry can't be put into a backpack, pocket or purse. That was true of the soldiers O'Brien writes about. That's true of us. We carry all sorts of things.

We carry expectations. The expectations of others have the power to inspire us or paralyze us. We carry around our own expectations of ourselves and others. Depending how realistic they are we spend our days disappointed.

We carry hunger—hunger for recognition, for meaning, for connection.

We carry fear—fear of looking foolish, fear of being abandoned, fear of failure.

We carry stories. Stories that remind us where we came from. Stories that tell us where we are going. Stories in which we are the hero. Stories in which we are not the hero.

We carry many things.

Some of us carry around the corrosive idea that we will only be loved if we are successful, that we will only be valued if we are useful. We carry a feeling of unworthiness in the sight of God and others.

We carry with us our scars and wounds, our broken places, the experience of being hurt, being rejected. Sometimes those things help us to be more compassionate, other times those memories makes us tough and hard.

We carry so much. Again, Tim O'Brien.

Taking turns, they carried the big scrambler radio which weighed thirty pounds with its battery. They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often they carried each other, the wounded or weak. They carried chess sets, basketballs, Vietnamese-English dictionaries, Bronze Stars, Purple Hearts. They carried diseases—malaria and dysentery, they carried lice and

³ IBID.

ringworm and leaches, rots and molds. They carried the land itself—Vietnam, the place, the soil. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere they carried it—the humidity, the monsoons... All of it.⁴

We are all carrying around so much. It's exhausting. So, how do we lighten the load? It's time to turn to our passage for today. It has something to say about such things.

Up to this point in Mark's gospel, it's all Jesus. He teaches. He preaches. He does all of the heavy lifting. The disciples mostly just watch. And then in chapter six Jesus decides to send the disciples out on their own. He doesn't say why. Maybe it's simple math. Twelve people can do more than one. Perhaps Jesus wants to prepare the disciples for life without him. Maybe he's just a good teacher and knows that people learn best by doing. For whatever reason, Jesus sends them out into the world to (and here I'm using Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage)

[preach] with joyful urgency that life can be radically different; ...[send] the demons packing; [bring] wellness to the sick, anointing their bodies, healing their spirits.

Jesus pays close attention to what the disciples carry. He doesn't want them to carry too much. He sends them out into the world with

No bread, no bag, no money in their belts.

That's the 1st century equivalent of no keys, no phone and no credit card. Jesus lets the disciples take sandals and a staff, but nothing more. It doesn't sound like much but Jesus knows that the most important things we carry can't be put into a backpack, pocket or purse, things like hope and compassion, vulnerability and openness.

In sending them out with so little, Jesus gives the disciples no choice but to interact with the people they meet. They will be dependent on the resources and good will of others. They will have to receive as much as they give. Jesus sends the disciples out into the world with open hands knowing that they will be forced to rely on others. Hoping they will rely on God.

Jesus sends them out with so little so they can trust that who they are and what they offer is enough. He says to them:

Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. *You* are the equipment.⁵

That is so true. The most important and challenging things we face in life are things we can't prepare for. We learn that a dear friend has lost their spouse. We can wait a month to contact them and, in that time, read a book or two on grief, attend a seminar on coping with loss, do some role playing with a trained therapist or we can just show up. Not having the right words. Not remembering the stages of grief. With nothing in our hands. Trusting that we are enough—that what we have to offer is enough. And, this I know to be true, it always is. Jesus sends the disciples out with so little so they can learn to trust that they are enough.

It sounds scary doesn't it? Going out into the world armed only with God's confidence in us? It sounds scary. It sounds lovely.

Because the only way we can travel so lightly is if we put down most of what we regularly carry with us. Jesus invites us to put down our anxiety, our fear of failure and trust in ourselves and trust in God.

⁴ IBID.

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*.

And, just as important, trust in each other. Jesus doesn't send the disciples out alone. He sends them two by two. Everything is easier with a partner, colleagues, people, community. O'Brien's soldiers grow incredibly close to each other. As hard as it is for them to express this to each other and to those back home, they care deeply for one another. We can bear just about anything if we do not bear it alone. We are not alone on this journey—we are in the company of others. And when the going gets tough, we can support one another, laugh and cry with one another, if necessary, carry one another.

The most important things we carry can't be put into a backpack, pocket or purse.

Jesus invites us to go into the world, together, carrying with us open hands, a willingness to rely on others, an eagerness to rely on God.