
What Would Jesus Pack?

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 9 – Year B

We are used to hearing Jesus make use of many genres: the parable, the unanswerable question, the pithy saying, the apocalyptic warning, and the sermon, to name a few. But today, he turns to a different genre (one that I'm quite versed in!): the packing list.

While traveling on the road, Jesus has been rejected in his hometown, the one place he might have expected a warm welcome. Immediately after this, he sends his disciples out on a mission to continue the work he's begun. Naturally, they're worried about what they're going to say, or how they are going to cast out demons and cure the sick. But Jesus' focus is on something else: what they are to pack.

What's on Jesus' packing list? Well, not much. Just a walking stick and a pair of sandals. No extra clothes or shoes, no bag, no money, no bread, which strikes me as a very impractical way to pack and a downright irresponsible way to travel!

Last month, I, too, was sent out, with a group of Cathedral members on a mission pilgrimage to Cap-Haitien, Haiti. As you might imagine, my packing list looked nothing like Jesus'.

Instead of one tunic, I had five work shirts, four nicer shirts, three pairs of shorts, two pairs of long pants, two long-sleeved shirts for buggy evenings, a swimsuit, and a dress. Along with my pair of sandals, I brought a pair of tennis shoes for work days, and flip-flops for the beach. Needless to say, I had to bring a bag, just for my clothes! Then I needed another bag for important documents, and money, and my computer, and all my extra snacks. Whatever I didn't have, our youth director Maggie Paul had in spades. Between the two of us, there was nothing we hadn't thought of, prepared for, or packed. We had this!

I brought other baggage, too: plans and expectations about how we would spend our time, what our group needed from me, and what our Haitian hosts needed from us. I brought all kinds of assumptions, about service and leadership, about what constitutes a good life, and where and in whom I would encounter God.

But I quickly realized that I had way too much baggage. Literally.

Within minutes of retrieving our luggage from the conveyor belt at the airport, always an adventure, I was detained by a Creole-speaking customs officer. Our large and plenteous bags had attracted attention. It didn't take long in his small, windowless office, for me to recognize that I didn't have enough money or Creole to get myself out of this. So I begged for our Haitian contact, Elie, to be allowed in to help me. He was allowed, the two of them argued, and I was released, finally—much to the relief of the other 24 pilgrims who had been waiting for us. Spiritual lesson #1: Even with everything I'd brought with me, I couldn't do this on my own, and I didn't have to.

The spiritual training continued the next day, when we got to the children's home for our first workday. We'd planned to build soccer goals and a volleyball net; but the supervisor, along with his design and materials, was nowhere to be found! Our other project was delayed, too: we were going to serve a hot meal to patients at the medical clinic on site. But there was no propane to cook with, and it was a multi-hour endeavor to get more. So, instead, we practiced my least favorite spiritual

discipline: waiting. And waiting, and waiting. We practiced being idle and trusting that our presence mattered more than our productivity. And guess what? Without our planned activities and work between us, we ended up interacting more directly with one another and with the Haitian kids than we might have otherwise! Spiritual lesson #2.

I say “we,” but really, I was the student here, learning from the Cathedral youth I was supposedly leading. When our plans fell apart, *they* were the ones who took the real risk of reaching out, and feeling awkward themselves, to put their Haitian peers at ease. While I was scrambling to put our plans back together, *they* had already accepted what was and were making the most of what was. And they taught me the third spiritual lesson that I want to pass on to you: When all else fails, you can *always* play cards!

We were all learning from the Haitian kids, too. We had come to serve and help; yet we were guests in their home and strangers in their land, dependent on their hospitality and guidance. That was especially apparent on our last work day, when we were clearing a ravine for a new drainage system and fence. I can only imagine how odd and clueless we must have seemed to the older boys working with us. We were fascinated by the most basic of Haitian tools, the machete, and needed tutorials on how to use it. We scattered at the sight of a tarantula; and I needed some serious pastoral care after finding a lizard crawling under my shirt. We were constantly taking pictures and applying sunblock or bug-spray and drinking water. And not just any water! We required special water, and food, and bathrooms. Yes, we were high maintenance; and yet, all the while, our hosts were so gracious and patient with us!

This leads me to spiritual lesson #4: Sometimes, it can be harder to receive than to give. But sometimes, that’s just what true service or true justice requires. And for many of us, that’s exactly where spiritual growth lies. It was hard to give up control, to relinquish the position of power—the position of expert or leader or helper or host. But it was through the many ways that I was served, taught, led, or humored that I was really challenged, spiritually, and encountered God most powerfully.

In spite of all of my packing and planning and preparing, I didn’t have everything we needed, I couldn’t control how things went, and there was still so much I didn’t know. And I’m glad. Because that opened me up to learn from others; it made room to receive the gifts they had to offer and to bring them back home, to share with you. And I’m glad, because my resources and plans and expectations would’ve been a poor substitute for the real faith that a journey like this requires.

What baggage could you shed, in order to travel more lightly, and faithfully?