

Sermon for 8-7-2016 Fourth Sunday in BGO - "God's Story, My Story, Our Story: Disciples by Twos"
 LUKE 10 (Message) PHILIPPIANS 3 (Message) MICAH 6 (NIV & Message) GALATIANS 5 (Message) I CORINTHIANS 13 (NIV & Message)

We've mentioned to a few of you that when Amy and I became a couple, we had to take 2 ½ households and combine them into one to move down here; the half came from the house I own in East Moline, which I still had stuff in. So we as a clergy couple joined a time-honored tradition for Methodist pastors: leaving furniture at the previous parsonage for the incoming pastor to deal with – use, I mean use.

As far as combining households, Amy got the worse end of the deal. She had been diligent over the years to reduce clutter & weed out things she didn't really need. My family, on the other hand, became almost fanatical

in keeping things we thought might be useful or important...someday. It wasn't until the sorting out process that I realized how bad it had gotten. We'd been given multiple copies of the same book from different people, but didn't get rid of the extras because they were gifts.

We'd kept school papers from the kids from pre-k on, thinking that, well, they were all "special".

We had boxes of pictures, even of people none of us recognized any more. And somehow all of it ended up as having equal importance; my favorite Father's Day card from my son was in the same box with a passing note from someone we'd met once.

Long story short: when we left the last parsonage, we gave around 50 containers of clothes & household items to the Salvation Army, and threw out dozens upon dozens of trash bags. And it really hit home to me how many things we hold onto, thinking they are necessities and keepsakes, that end up really being baggage and garbage.

We're continuing with a series of "getting to know the Pastor" sermons, where I share some of my story with you, while connecting my life with the lives of some of the people from the Bible. I think we all at 1 time or another have seen ourselves living like one of those Bible folks, for good or for bad. & often I think we see in them the way we should live, the way we WANT to live, the way God wants us to live.

As He sends them out by twos, Jesus tells His disciples,
"Travel light. Comb and toothbrush and no extra luggage."
 But I'm afraid that especially in the USA, we travel this life heavy.

We surround ourselves with stuff, necessary or not;
 just taking care of our possessions adds a load to our lives
 and takes us away from doing other, more important things.
 But even more than the physical part, we travel with heavy hearts,
 with minds drowning in thought,
 with souls and spirits overburdened by emotional baggage and personal garbage.

From a spiritual standpoint, I think of baggage as the stuff that others put onto us:
 piling on guilt, overloading us with responsibilities we aren't supposed to carry.
 How about the baggage of expectations? Have you ever heard, or maybe felt like:
 "If he really cared, he would...", or "If she really loved me, then..."

Those kind of expectations show up in our church life too, if we're not careful:
 we might expect people to act a certain way, dress a certain way,
 believe a certain way, if we're going to consider them "real Christians."

In doing that, we don't take into consideration
 where a person might be in his or her spiritual journey. Even worse,
 we can end up trying to put conditions on the unconditional love that Jesus gives.

The Apostle Paul dealt with that kind of attitude in his ministry and in his own life.
 He started out trying to be, as he put it, "a Hebrew among Hebrews,"
 aiming at following the Law of Moses to the letter.

After meeting the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus,
 Paul realized that he'd had the wrong goal in mind.

Knowing Christ personally, experiencing His resurrection power, even being
 a partner in His suffering, showed the rule-keeping life he'd led to be inferior stuff.
 It's like what Paul wrote to the Galatians, who had their own expectation problems,
 with people saying they needed to be a rule-following Jew to be a "good Christian":
 Legalism is helpless in bringing about the kind of life that God designed for us,
 it only gets in the way.

We need to be faithful in our commitments and accountable for our actions,
 but trying to live under others expectations, & putting expectations onto others,
 that might be unnecessary baggage we should rid ourselves of.

What about some of the garbage in our lives,
 things that we put in and hold onto, even though it can make us sick in our souls?
 Well, there's the garbage of past hurts.

We gather up the wrongs that people have done to us, the pain they've caused,
 and we allow those things to fester in us.

The disciples could have done that, held onto the rejection they felt.

that's why Jesus told them to shake the dust from their shoes and move on;
that's why, when Peter asked if he should forgive people 7 times, Jesus said 70 X 7.
If you are holding onto grudges, holding onto an unforgiving spirit,
the person you are really hurting is yourself.

There also that garbage of negative thoughts: about things,
about people, but especially about ourselves.

We can feel like nothing is or will go right in our lives, that no one is on our side,
that we are too clumsy, too unskilled, too weak, too...whatever, to do anyone any good
In the Galatian letter, Paul writes about the conviction that a basic holiness
permeates things and people; it's true for others, it's true for us as well.
Paul would also tell us whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right,
whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—
if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

I said earlier that we hold onto things thinking they are necessities and keepsakes,
that end up really being baggage and garbage.

We've talked about some of the bad stuff to get rid of; so what should we keep?

Let's start with the necessities, because the Bible has a lot to tell us on that.

We hear from the prophet Micah that the Lord requires us to act justly,
to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God - good things there.

There's the fruit that displays the Holy Spirit's power & presence in our lives:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness & self-control.

There the three mentioned in First Corinthians 13: faith, hope and love.

But Paul would point us to the ultimate necessity, what made all else inferior:

knowing Christ personally, experiencing his resurrection power,
being a partner in his suffering. It's like he wrote:

***I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus.
I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.***

And keepsakes?

I see those as the things that God gives us to remind us of His presence in our lives.

Take prayer - it reminds us that we have our relationship with God.

Reading scripture reminds us that God wants us to know him.

Worship reminds us of our place in God's kingdom, and God's great worth.

Even our fellowship with each other reminds us that we were made for relationship,
just as Father, Son and Spirit are in relationship with each other.

All of it - getting rid of the baggage and garbage,
holding onto the necessities and keepsakes - it all comes together in the keepsake,
the sacrament, of Holy Communion.

In it we remember the necessity we have for a Savior, One to redeem our sin-sick lives.

We remember that Christ came that we might be freed

from all the baggage and garbage the world throws at us.

And we remember the great love that God has for all His children,
demonstrated throughout history and on into eternity.

So today, I want to challenge you:

take this opportunity to dump some of the garbage or leave some of your baggage.

As you come forward, name in your heart what you might need to let loose of,

then give it up to God as you receive the elements.

When Jesus went to the cross, he took all the baggage & garbage of our sin with him,
getting rid of the bad stuff so we could fill our lives with the good.

So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us.

***If any of us have something else in mind, God will clear our blurred vision—
we'll see it yet!***

Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.