

“Packing List”

Luke 10:1-11

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The Eve of the 4th of July Eve is not an official holiday, but maybe it should be. On Christmas Eve we tell the story of Christmas Day, pondering its implications for our lives. On New Year’s Eve we look ahead to the New Year, making promises and resolutions, vowing to continue the work began in the last year to be the people we long to be.

On Thanksgiving Eve, if you go to restaurants and bars you will see gatherings of chosen family - childhood friends reuniting after years apart, reminding each other of where they came from and bearing witness to the places they have since traveled, folks gathering together with their family of choice before the next day’s gathering of family by birth.

Even on the eve of wedding celebrations, the closest among the betrothed’s circle gather for dinner, pouring out toasts and swapping stories, grounding the couple in the love of their people before they go through the ceremony and rituals of the next day. On the eve of big events and annual holidays we look back at where we come, we share stories of our values and our hopes, we surround ourselves with those we love dearest, and we prepare ourselves for what is to come.

On the 4th of July we will remember the birth and independence of the United States of America and it’s experiment with democracy. Our cookouts and overflowing tables will tell stories of hopes for past and future prosperity, our fireworks will echo the cannons of war from long ago. We’ll go to parades that herald triumph and celebration even as many of us privately struggle with the inner workings of this country, particularly stunned and grieving after a week in

which the high court in the nation gutted so many of the ideals we hold close, so many of the protections advocates in our congregation have dedicated their lives to working toward including separation of church and state, environmental protection, ending gun violence, and abortion rights.

What then are we supposed to do on the eve of the 4th of July? How are we to prepare ourselves for what is to come, not tomorrow, but in the months and years ahead, knowing that injustice is as swift as justice is slow, knowing that we are girding our loins for a new generation of advocacy and activism, of positioning ourselves to protect the most vulnerable, in and outside of state-sanctioned systems?

Perhaps there is something to be gleaned from Jesus commissioning the disciples to go out, town by town. He is preparing them for what is to come, not the just the logistics like “you will be traveling, two by two, into new towns that I have not yet been” but also preparing them for what they will encounter when they arrive, telling them about the opposition they will face: they will be like lambs in the midst of wolves.

When we hear these words, right away we know that discipleship - striving to live a life that patterns itself after Jesus’ life and ministry - is going to involve conflict. Jesus gave a voice to those who had been silenced. He moved oppressed people from the margins to the center of communal life, offering a healing that defied authority and went against laws and social norms. He did not chase conflict for the sake of being oppositional, but he accepted it knowing that it was the cost of working for justice, working to liberate all people, turning upside down the structures that created outsiders and insiders, those who were protected and those who were not.

As we hear that same call to discipleship two thousand years later, we already have experienced opposition and conflict, such as when we give voice to injustices in our

incarceration, education, political, and judicial systems. We have witnessed an increase in conflict in recent years, notably after November 2016, March 2020, and January 6, 2021. History is not linear - and even though conflict has always been present in some form or another, there are times when it seems like the wolves are nipping at our heels and other times when they have left the pasture.

Signs of the increase in division have come not just from out there in the wider world, but here in our community, where we eye our neighbors wondering which side they are on, where folks face aggression on a regular basis. One recent example is the Eastside neighborhood of Lansing. They had their prominent pride flag stolen multiple times and then burned during pride month - a reminder of the opposition and conflict in places that were once labeled safe.

It's not just out around our towns and cities. How many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with the divisions in our extended families or with coworkers? How many of us have named being lucky if we do not have that tension in our own families as we watch fights or unprecedented silence settle into the homes of loved ones? There has been an increase in the strain between interpersonal relationships, lines being divided as people give voice to the values that matter most, the people they will risk harmony to defend and protect. We might not call some of the folks on the other side of these disagreements wolves, we call them cousins, siblings, parents, friends, but it's increasingly clear that the path we are on is not a universally agreed upon route or destination.

When Jesus sends out his disciples, knowing there will be conflict and opposition, he does not send them alone. They go two by two. This is critical. Discipleship is not about martyrdom or isolation. It is about relationship. On 4th of July eve we ask: what are the relationships that will carry you through this next period of living in American history? Who do

you need to inspire you, to strengthen you, to remind you to take a water break or rest with you when you are weary?

Often when we hear of injustice increasing around us, our reaction is to act - immediately and with great conviction. There will be times to act, but before we can do that, we need to identify and invest in the relationships with people that will act with us. Who are our coconspirators? Who will lift their voice for justice and amplify your own? Who do you want by your side?

As a church, we might find some of those people in our midst. I believe the most important thing we can do as a congregation right now is invest in deepening our relationships so that when we need someone to support us, to encourage us, to fight with us, we will have each other. Deepening relationships requires vulnerability and showing up for each other as quick as we are to sign up for the next call to action or social justice initiative. The church is first and foremost about relationships, and when I think of how we will find our way through a time which is marked by deep political divisions, I know I need a faith community to make that journey with me. I need to be able to look to each of you along the way and know I am not alone.

Next, Jesus tells his disciples to not carry anything with them - no purse, no bag, no sandals. There is no material possession that will save us in the quest for shared liberation. There is no magic tool that will relieve us, no Amazon order that will protect us. Purses can be stolen, bags misplaced. Sandals wear out and fall apart.

What will you take with you into this new era of history that cannot be stolen or misplaced, that will not wear out with time? What will you take that is etched on your heart and will sustain your spirit in the hardest of times?

Jesus tells his first disciples to take peace with them. The peace Jesus calls for is not a passive peace - it is a peace that fuels a fight for equality and equity, a peace that is ordained by God and does not rest until all of God's children are cared for. It is a peace that can be seen by others and will become a guidepost - signaling what you stand for, letting them know if you are to be trusted, if you are a fellow sojourner for peace or if you are just another wolf in sheep's clothes.

We sing songs about peace, about a peace deep in our souls, the kind of peace that does not dwindle or wander off, the kind of peace that shines even in the darkest of nights. Perhaps you would use a different word. Perhaps you will carry with you love or hope or compassion or something else. Whatever that something is, name what it is that fuels you. Name what it is that can't be stolen or misplaced. Name what it is that will never wear out, even when you are worn out.

And when you name it, put it on your packing list. This 4th of July Eve we are packing our bags and preparing for the next arc in the history of this country. It is an era when we are called to go out together, to call in our people to make the journey with us, and to take only that which can't be taken from us. May we find ourselves prepared for whatever comes next, not because we've studied the policies or stacked the courts, but because the path of discipleship has equipped us for the road ahead, knowing there will be conflict and division, but knowing that greater still will be the love and peace of Christ lighting the way forward. With the help of God, may it be so.