

Over-packing for the journey (Mark 6:1-13)

Is this passage more than a cautionary tale about the tendency to stuff a suitcase to the gills?

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Take a staff, no bread, no backpack, no cash, no change of clothes... And if you aren't received, shake the dust from that place off your feet.

Jesus' instructions to the Twelve hit me where it hurts. I've always been guilty of over-packing. Whether I'm going on a two-day trip or traveling through life, I try to prepare for every possible contingency. And even though I've reached that time in life when downsizing deserves to be a top priority, the list of things I consider necessary for optimum survival does not seem to be getting shorter—just different. Not that I absolutely *need* the super-soft toilet seat warmers I just ordered (in brown, pink, and blue).

Surely Jesus isn't trying to normalize an extreme stripped-to-the-bones ethic as *the* way of life for the Christian movement going forward. His marching orders to the Twelve are specific to their particular time and place and mission—a mission that requires them to “get naked,” so to speak, so they can be re-clothed as *alter Christus*. Desperate times call for desperate measures, right?

But even if the one-tunic rule isn't set in stone, there is something here that I can't set aside. Apart from being a cautionary word about the hazards of stuffing my suitcase to the gills, how does this passage translate into my everyday call to live

Christianly?

Perhaps these packing restrictions can remind me to make a “what I need to leave behind” list whenever I set out to represent the reign of God. Whether I’m fighting for victims of sex trafficking or responding to a neighbor who takes a different view on gun control or immigration, I need to remember to leave my combat boots at home and check my arsenal of bullet points at the gate. And maybe, as I learn to jettison more of my extra baggage, I’ll discover generosity in places I would never have thought to look for it. I may even find that the people I’m so intent on helping (or changing) have gifts—gifts I need to receive and treasure if there’s any chance of banishing the darkness from my own heart.

That said, the dust-shaking prescription is still a big problem. Whether it was originally intended as a decontamination rite or a dissing ritual, what purpose could this possibly serve in our time? The last thing we need is permission to demean or vilify people who don’t validate us or warm up to our way of running the world (even if Jesus does seem to be handing out blank checks).

Or maybe there’s a lens that will allow me to see this dust on my sandals differently. If by dust we mean

- the stuff I cling to so I can throw it back in someone’s face, or produce it as evidence in the case I’m building against them;
- the psychological strings that attach me to a confrontation or disagreement, so that it defines me or diminishes my sense of call;
- the dust bowl of cynicism, fear, and futility I walk around in every day, which (if I pack it in my emotional suitcase and bring it home) will be toxic to my spirit;

well then I’ll definitely eat my words about this passage. And I will even go so far as to write a liturgy for dust-shaking, because I obviously need one.

But I’m totally keeping my toilet seat warmers.