

“Packing List for Camp Jesus”

July 7, 2019

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Psalm 30

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Last Sunday, Kai, Chris and I left for a half-week stay as campers at Johnsonburg, our NJ Presbyterian Camp and Retreat Center.

Unlike when I was an early camper, I did not pore over our packing list. I have done this camping thing so many times that I know exactly what I need, including flip-flops for the shower, an eye mask for the bright moon throwing its light on my face, or when the sun rises at 5:30 am. Now, there is one thing that years of wisdom gleaned from sleepless nights on retreats and mission trips has taught me is an essential: Earplugs! But I figured the sounds of my own family would be familiar enough that I would not need them. I was wrong-- if you put a 7-year old in a top bunk in a strange room, she may sleep, but she will have lots to say in her sleep.

But there were some things Camp Johnsonburg warned us *not* to bring or use. First among those was our cell phones. This was not just for the kids— Adults were told to keep ours out of public spaces too. I mostly did, except for sneakily checking the score for the women’s World Cup and checking church emails when I was hiding in a corner of my cabin. Other than that, my focus was on my child, on the people I was meeting, and on all that the trees, the fresh air, the rippling lake, the chipmunks, the fireflies, and the croaking frogs were telling me of the glory of God.

We were also told not to bring food. Many creatures besides human ones make their home at Johnsonburg, and bears and raccoons are particularly curious and have been known to explore if it smells like there is food around. The camp tries to stay peanut-free to keep it safe for those with allergies, and when all food must go through the kitchen, they know it’s safe. But the biggest reason, I suspect, that they asked us to not bring food is that meal time is the central point of connection throughout the day. We never knew what was would be served to us, and as the person in the family who makes most of the meals, I delighted in the simple grace of eating whatever showed up in front of me. For the first meals, my family sat close to the VanDeWeerts-- the only other family we knew there-- but it wasn’t long before we explored other tables, and Kai even separated from her parents to sit with her new friends. There is something about

breaking bread together that fosters connection. Jesus knew and used that simple truth in his ministry.

The organizers at Camp Johnsonburg wanted their campers to keep it simple. But Jesus' rules for the 70 he sent to spread the good news took simple to the extreme: no purse, no bag, no sandals. Rely on the hospitality of strangers for your housing and food, and eat what is served to you.

I learned this lesson when I first started going on international mission trips through the Presbyterian Church (USA). Before that, I had led one mission trip of high schoolers to Honduras, where we volunteered through a Christian organization to build a cistern, to hold water in a village that had no water access nearby. As it turned out, the local villagers knew better how to build what they needed than we did, and as we worked side-by-side it became apparent that locals were the ones teaching our group of teenagers how to do what needed to be done. We realized these villagers were entirely capable of doing the work themselves; it was our dollars they needed more than our labor to make it possible. It was exhausting work in the hot and humid jungle, so we appreciated our breaks, where we would drink our water and play with the village children in the shade. We had brought small toys and school supplies as gifts, which of course made the children swarm to us to see what we would produce for them. At the end of the day, our group all stayed together, sprawled on the floor of a community center that was guarded by a hired security officer holding a machine gun. The organization had hired for us a cook, who made amazing food, including the best pupusas ever, which our group ate together on our own. When we left, a deep cistern had been dug and we felt pretty great about the imprint we had made. But looking back, I'm not sure the community we served saw us as anything more than volunteer tourists passing through.

After that, I led mission trips to Peru in one church, and then Colombia in another--hosted by the Presbyterian church in each country. These were a bit different, in that our church hosts instructed us to **not** bring any gifts. Instead, we were told, the church people would like to make gifts to share with *us*-- which they did! In Peru, we were presented with colorful, hand-knit caps that kept us warm in the cooler air; since it was summer back in the US, we had not realized that just south of the equator, they were having their mild winter. In Colombia, they wrapped around our wrists bracelets the schoolchildren had made, in bright yellows, reds, and blues: the colors of Colombia. Instead of having our own place to sleep as a group, we were divided into pairs, and each was sent to a different family and a different Presbyterian church. Some of us were not fluent in Spanish. We were more than a bit nervous, for we were at the mercy

of our hosts for our food, our beds, our language, our safety, and our comfort. All of us from the US were used to our independence, and being able to access what we wanted *when* we wanted it. This would be a pilgrimage of trust.

As it turns out, our hosts were completely worthy of our trust. They went above and beyond the call of duty to make sure we felt very safe and comfortable, and absolutely well-fed. In some cases, I suspect they were giving us their own beds and sleeping in the less comfortable room or sharing beds with other family members. And even though not all of us could speak Spanish well, I knew our hosts had come to know us at the point when they started making fun of us in a good-hearted way, exposing each of us for our quirky personality traits that only become apparent when you travel and share close quarters with one another.

We did not leave Peru or Colombia with a sense of being the heroes-- we hadn't built anything, or showered the children with gifts. But we did leave with a deep commitment: we knew our dollars would support the good work that their local churches were already doing. And beyond that, we took what we had seen and known, and we met with congressional representatives and people at the US State Department to share our concerns that the peace process in Colombia get the support they need from the US. The Peace Agreement in Colombia was eventually signed, and while the different groups still have difficult work to do, I like to think that our advocacy meant more than if we had painted a building. And what we did share was a meaningful Christian exchange, built on mutuality and trust, rather than the patronizing way that Christian missions sometimes treat the people they serve. I had not realized it before, but I have been part of lots of mission trips that have unintentionally reinforced the power gap between those on the mission, and those they serve. Too often mission groups coming in to a country act like they know better how to fix problems than the people who grapple with their problems everyday. That's not to say that we, who live in this wealthy country, shouldn't share resources that help countries or groups in need. We absolutely should share what we have with thoughtful generosity. But we should do it in a way that recognizes human dignity, and supports their self-development by honoring the wisdom and creativity a community already possesses.

The power of being a guest who was treated with such care and hospitality, especially when we were feeling more than a little vulnerable, tied us to our hosts in a way that my trip to Honduras did not produce. The relationships we built there continued, and each of those churches continue their visits to Peru and to Colombia, respectively, even after I left, supporting their church's mission as defined by the local people. We also brought

back tools we learned for peacemaking-- for in each of these communities, they taught us strategies for healing after surviving political violence.

As a preacher, this is a message that I need to keep in mind: always be ready to be a guest in someone else's life. It humbles me that when I preach, I have 10-15 minutes when I get to be the guest in your mind. There are not many public places these days where anyone listens to just one person for that long. I spend a lot of time thinking of what it would mean to be a good guest in your heads while you receive what I have to preach, one who can ignite your love for God, or spark your curiosity for connecting scripture to life. Sometimes, I arrive at the doorway of your attention carrying a big load that I have been working through in preparation: stacks of commentaries; the original Greek and Hebrew translations; excerpts from other preachers' sermons on that same text, and of course, my own baggage. I feel safer with all these tools, especially as the clock ticks into the wee hours of the night before while I'm preparing the sermon. But the truth is, if I can't just tell the story in a simple way, I'm not really bringing the gospel. Now, I don't dismiss how important it is to spend time in deep study of the Word. The Presbyterian tradition does not take an in-depth study of scripture lightly. But I also recognize that you could easily sit at your computer screens and read the same articles, the same sermons, that I read. There is something more that a public, embodied, giving and receiving of one another's experience of the text brings that words alone cannot fill.

By telling the 70 to bring nothing with them, Jesus is letting them know: just be yourselves. You are the most important instrument that can tell the story of this faith. And that message belongs not only to the apostles. That message does not just belong to preachers, either. Jesus' message is for you.

You already have what we need to share faith: your bodies, your lives, your experiences. Teresa of Avila, the 16th century Spanish mystic, shared this wisdom: "Christ has no body on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless others now."

You have your packing list. Now go, Christians, and share the good news. Amen.