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The Liberating Lightness of Grace

Rick Steves could be borrowing from Jesus when he says “there are two kinds of people in the world, those who pack light, and those who wish they had.”

Mildred Norman was born in New Jersey in 1908. After a divorce she began a transformation, working for peace organizations and finding inner peace by simplifying her life. She also took up walking. At the age of 44, she became the first woman to walk the entire Appalachian Trail in a single season. Along the way she developed the vision for a new purpose and a new way of life. And a new name, known as Peace Pilgrim.

It was a 28-year journey, during which she walked across the continent seven times, visiting every state and Canadian province. Pilgrim walked on faith. She carried no money. She took food and shelter when it was offered by others. She walked to promote peace of all kinds.

Jesus said, Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. Whatever house you enter, offer peace. If anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near.’ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you.

Shake it off. You know what you are called to do. Jesus’ invitation is clear: pack light. Save room for what you might still discover. Be ready to receive from others as you go. This is risky. In our world where everyone seems to have an agenda, suspicious of others, and in a hurry, siloed, this is different. This is about mutual encounter/hospitality.

We carry so many things with us that keep us from engaging with those we meet along the road. We have expectations that take up room. Expectations about how these kinds of encounters that seem kind of like evangelism are supposed to go. What we are supposed to say. How do I start? Where do I go? How will we be received? What will people think about us?

We haul around baggage that can be so heavy. Baggage from how we grew up thinking about our faith or engaging with outsiders. Baggage around what we were taught about those who are not like us and potential eternal destinations that might hang in the balance. Baggage around the idea that we are always the saviors and they are always the lost. That's a lot.

There are other things. It's like they wrap themselves around our hands and hearts. Like more bricks in our backpack. Fear of rejection or judgement. Shame. Regret. Embarrassment. Things we have done and left undone. Words that others have spoken over us that seem to linger with an air of finality. They find their way into those backpacks. Cling. These items keep us curved in and lull us into isolation and retreat. Stuck.

Many of us are burdened by the state of our country. We are exhausted. It's estimated that 330,000 people in Illinois alone could lose medicaid in light of the recent bill that became law. Whatever your convictions about healthcare and its funding sources - that is immoral.

There is so much that weighs us down. Jesus' invitation for those who are commissioned to go before him still stands: pack light. This is risky. It leaves us vulnerable. Categories and conversations are cruciform. Broken open.

Eloise will be baptized today. In those waters she will receive a new name. Child of God. One that she will bear as she walks ahead. In those waters we have been joined to Christ and to one another. We are his body on earth. Our names are etched into the book of life and cannot be erased. The only death we ever need to fear is behind us. We have nothing left to prove.

The never ending love of God that embraces you and all creation does not depend on anyone but Jesus Christ. In his work and effort it is taken care of. Our only boast is in the cross. It's on your brow. The reign of God has come near. Drop it and live.

I don't know what it looks like for you to let go and empty that backpack and all that the world has put into it. It might feel like a kind of death. You've bore it so long. It's scary. Yet, it will always lead to a new life. Resurrection. Lightness. Room. The vast expanse of life with God. So-go!

With open hands we receive gifts. Christ's own body, food from strangers, new perspectives that help us imagine a future beyond your own horizons. Companionship. Curiosity not suspicion. The miracle of no agenda. Evangelize and be evangelized. Proclaim peace fiercely. Speak out. Listen. We are free like the mystics to say, "it is better to receive hospitality than to give it."

Packing lightly creates space for us to share, and to receive Christ, present in a million places. Over and over again. For you. God has got us.

