

# **What We Need**

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Mark 6:1-13  
2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Two weeks ago I confessed in a sermon (preached to HMC) that I have avoided preaching about money, but am now ready to tackle the topic. I planned three sermons on money. Then the derecho hit and along with the power, one sermon was knocked out.

In the lectionary readings for today, prescribed – not chosen by me – we have a difficult text from Mark about money and discipleship. Jesus sends his disciples out on the road without money or anything else for that matter.

According to Mark's gospel, Jesus has been preaching, calling disciples, healing, casting out spirits, preaching, healing, making disciples, preaching, healing ... all around the lake. Every time he tries to get away for a short respite, either by boat or on foot, the crowds follow him. He must be exhausted. He finally comes home, to see his family, to be among his people, to teach in the synagogue instead of on the hillside or from a boat.

The result? People can't even hear what he has to say; all they can do is gossip about him. "Now, isn't that Mary's son? He's a carpenter, right? There are his sisters, right over there. And his brothers too. Uh, uh, uh, and is there even a father in that household?"

You know how it is, if people have chucked you under the chin and seen you in a diaper, they just can't believe you have grown up. All they can say is, "I remember when

you were just this tall.” Even if they watch as you grow, all they remember is that your hair was uncombed and your clothing didn’t fit right as a teenager. And according to Mark, Jesus has an additional strike against him. He is Mary’s son, yes, but who is the father that provides the legitimacy of a Jewish lineage?

Jesus takes it in stride; he understands. “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometowns and among their family.” Yet the reality is that he has limited power with these people that are so scandalized by him. He can only heal a very few, so he teaches instead and heads to the neighboring towns where presumably he can do a bit of the work to which he is called.

Perhaps it is this difficult homecoming that pushes him to send his followers on the road. Does he now realize that home may be sweet, but if one really wants to make a difference one has to leave? Familiarity is not always helpful when it comes to respect, honor, healing and power.

He sends his followers on the road, not alone mind you, with a partner. But that is all they get to take with them. No food, no overnight bag, no money, not even an extra tunic. Usually people wore two tunics, the first presumably being a kind of undergarment. Does this mean Jesus is asking them to hit the road in their underwear?

But that is not the end of the instruction. They are to visit households, not synagogues, to cast out evil spirits. And if they are not welcomed at the home, they are not to persist, just move on. They have seen Jesus rejected in his own home town; they know what that is like. No need to push the topic anymore. If people are not receptive then move on to those who are, go to places where interactions are more fruitful, and the power of God can work effectively.

When we read this text, we often focus on the going out two by two as disciples, carrying the gospel, spreading the good news. But today, reading the text with money in mind we might ask a different set of questions.

Why does Jesus send his followers out with nothing but one tunic and sandals? They are poor to be sure. They are fisherman and as they have been following an itinerant preacher, they don't have much, but they may have two tunics. They probably have families that can give them bread to carry, at least for the first day, but Jesus even nixes that.

Maybe people will be more receptive to their message of repentance if they are dressed as traditional prophets. Traveling light illustrates that they have already repented, that they are dependent on God alone and not on their stuff or the servants who carry their stuff.

Perhaps if they look needy, but not too needy, they will be more quickly invited into a home for the night. And once they are there, few possessions (or no possessions) may allow relationships to be built on new ideas and understandings. No time will be wasted on trying to make a good impression or comparing the latest fashion. There will be no angling for position, as it will be quite clear that they have no power except the power given to them through God.

The pairs of disciples are underdressed and penniless, and according to Mark, their ministry is effective. They cast out demons, anoint people and heal.

So what message might this be for us, disciples 2000 years later? We are on the road a lot — but not necessarily in twos, to heal and preach repentance.

Over the years I have encountered a number of people who are on the road, seeking a place to call home, but several months ago a new version of this scenario came to my attention. I received word from the International Red Cross, via Mennonite Central Committee, that an Amish family was being deported from Germany (their visas had run out) and was arriving soon at Dulles airport. They needed a place to stay and financial help. In this economy a lot of people need help and most of us are more receptive to helping those with whom we have some relationship. While I do not know this family, they are Amish so there must be some ancestral connection.

This family of six traveled lightly; they each had more than one tunic, but given what we have come to expect in this century, they were not burdened with a lot of belongings. If the lack of traveling gear made it easy for first century disciples to find lodging, it didn't work the same way in this case. Various Anabaptist individuals and congregations helped the family with money at motels for several weeks. Finally a Beachy Amish man generously offered to let them stay in his cabin in Fauquier County. Through the mutual assistance fund, Hyattsville Mennonite Church helped the family with half a month's rent.

This was not an easy decision; the more information we learned about the family's history and their sojourns in the U.S. and Germany, the more questions were raised about helping them. I know the cultural expectations are vastly different now, but it makes me wonder how a pair of disciples actually pulled this off, asking to be housed in someone's home for several nights. Did the two need to recite a family history, work history, give bonafides about the healing they had done so far? No wonder Jesus told

them to just shake the dust off their sandals if people wouldn't listen. Don't waste time with the small things; if there is no hospitality just keep moving.

When I read this passage from Mark in our context I wonder is this family following Jesus' commands to his disciples? By traveling light, asking for help, with no place to call home? Are they prophets acting out true discipleship or are they just freeloaders? Does having few financial resources and no place to call home indicate faithfulness to God or a lack of planning? And who are we, who have homes and legal citizenship, to judge true discipleship?

Last winter I attended Eastern Mennonite Seminary's School for Leadership Training. One of the seminars was led by Ruth and Timothy Stoltzfus Jost. I have heard Timothy on NPR occasionally talking about the cost of health care or the Affordable Care Act.

Timothy and Ruth are not healers, and I do not know their record of casting out demons. But I believe they are disciples when it comes to taking seriously Jesus' teachings on money. (They are also humble and quick to say that they do not have all the answers.)

As attorneys, these followers of Jesus have education and enough money at their disposal to live comfortably. But they do not take their good fortune lightly. Over the years they have developed a system for keeping themselves accountable for their spending, not so they can be tightfisted, but so they can be more generous than they even imagined they could be.

Two weeks ago during the children's time (at the HMC service) David Conrad talked about how he was instructed by his parents to categorize his 10 cent allowance

each week. (I forget the four categories but I know 1 cent each week went to the offering.)

Ruth and Timothy have a similar system though with five columns and different percentages. The first is “non-discretionary spending” for things like housing, transportation, student loans. They have a “joint household” category and “personal household” category. They each have a “personal” amount they can spend monthly and there is a column for “giving,” which can be to their local congregation, church institutions and other worthy causes.

Though I heard them describe this system — that they admittedly continue to tweak and refine, I can’t remember much detail. I do remember Timothy saying that this system allows him to be more generous in an emergency situation because he does not have to consult with his spouse. They consult on small household expenses, but less so on a splurge of generosity. It was inspiring to hear the joy this has brought to their lives, to be able to give so much money away.

Is the Stoltzfus Jost family following Jesus’ call to discipleship? They certainly have more than one tunic and probably several pairs of sandals (and given their personal spending allowance each month it is almost all from the local thrift store.) Are we more likely to see discipleship in this family since they look a bit more like us, with their education and careers, their home and cars?

We (the HMC congregation) have a sister church – Remanso de Paz – in Sincelejo, Colombia. Its members are mostly displaced people from the Mountains of Maria who had to flee their farmland and homes because of the ongoing violence in that country. When these sisters and brothers have visited us, we have heard them say

(very gently but honestly) that they think it must be harder to be a faithful follower of Jesus here, where we have so much. The distractions and demands of having the wealth that we do, the possessions we hold onto, can put some distance between us as disciples as well as those who we want to befriend and serve.

Jesus sent his disciples to cast out demons that possessed the people. I wonder, in this culture, time and place, if it is the possessions (and the quest for possessions) that cause us trouble. In our case are the possessions the demons? What is it that separates us from one another? What makes us lonely, and hold tight to what we have, even though we look successful and have it all?

Perhaps we find a clue in the other lectionary reading from II Corinthians. It is cryptic in its oblique references to being “caught up in the body – or is it the spirit” and that mysterious (and now infamous) thorn in the flesh. But is there some connection when Paul says that in weakness, in powerlessness, there is strength? Could it be that what gave the disciples the power to cast out demons and to heal, and as a result make more disciples and spread the good news, was their perceived powerlessness? The disciples preached repentance, an invitation to reprioritize life. They modeled a move away from an attachment to power as the world defines it (money and possessions) toward the less tangible: community, generosity, hospitality, love, health. In this shift from power to weakness, from security to living on the generosity of others, the disciples somehow find real joy that they are ready to share. In fact, they invite others to join them.

As disciples of this man Jesus, as people who model our lives on his life, we too are invited to let go and travel light. In a city where power is prized, but people search

for meaning, where lack of money causes worry and too much money creates conflict,  
let's invite others to journey with us in this generous, loving and joyful community.