

TRAVELING LIGHT: A Sermon by Dan Stern, BCUCC, July 7, 2002, Revised: July 6, 2008
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Genesis 24 and Matthew 11: "My burden is light."

Even with gas prices sky high, Summer is the season folks take journeys. We go backpacking or car camping, we visit relatives, we take tours to other countries, we stay home and let our minds travel, and...the manner in which we do all this traveling says a lot about how we live our entire lives. So today I would like us to consider how Jesus would have us "travel lightly".

A distinction needs to first be made. When one uses the word "light" as an adjective, the definition can lean in two very distinct directions. "Lightness", according to my American Heritage dictionary, can mean "of little importance or value, having less force or impact than normal, characterized by frivolity, silly, trivial, or fickle, having little moral discipline, wanton, insignificant, not serious or profound," as in "light chatter" or "a light comedy". The title of a book by Milan Kundera comes to mind, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being." When things in life are too light, too easy, too much lacking in meaning and significance, then life is unbearable. Oh, the unbearable lightness, when nothing matters. Far better to be somewhat overburdened with something meaningful in life than to be taking on nothing, attempting nothing, believing in nothing of importance.

The other direction one can go with the word "light" is, of course, to mean "unencumbered, graceful, delicate, without undo additional weight or burdens, moving easily." And would that more of us experienced this kind of 'lightness' in our lives! It's the kind that Jesus points us toward in saying, "My yoke is easy, my burden is light." It's the kind that takes time to consider the lilies and watch the sparrows, which is not to waste time, but to learn something profound from simple living things. It's about "the unforced rhythms of grace" – about slow growth and real rest, lighter-than-air flight and sustainability and recovery of a simple life.

I was raised in a church community that believed the simple life to be one of the central tenants of faithfulness to Christ.

Way back in the 1970's, I wrote an article about simple modes of travel that got published in *The Other Side* magazine. In it, I argued that Jesus would want us to travel simply, just as he calls us to live simply; just as he instructed his disciples to walk from town to town, and to carry nothing extra, to not be encumbered by too much stuff. At the time, I was mostly doing my traveling by thumb or by hopping on empty boxcars. Automobiles, I reasoned after all, were made to hold two people, at the very least, were they not? But most of them in rush-hour traffic go by on the highway only carrying one. And freight trains, well, at least half of them rattle empty across this great land that we live in; why not, I thought, make good use of them too and ride free, and thus reduce my carbon imprint? I felt pretty righteous knowing how Jesus had sent out his disciples carrying nothing extra! When one hitchhikes or rides freight trains, it really is best to travel light. By the way, both of these modes of transportation can be quite dangerous—and more so today than when I was doing then. There are other safer ways to travel light too – bicycles and passenger trains for instance. One does a lot of walking too, (if only to get to the right places to get a ride)—I had strong legs in those days—and walking is decidedly not easy if too weighed down with unnecessary heavy stuff. I spend a lot of time reading the New Testament in those days; I had one of those little tiny pocket Gideon Bible editions that weigh about 4 ounces. Perfect for "letting your burden be light".

All this applies, I'd like to suggest, to our at-home, everyday lives as well. If we're encumbered with too much stuff, be it material things, spiritual trivia, or mental distractions, then our minds, our homes, and our very lives are cluttered, things that really don't matter weigh us down, we can't stay focused on the things that matter because we're literally and completely lost in the clutter of all those things that don't! I used to go for days on end backpacking in the wilderness too. Talk about the need to go light every single ounce matters. If you take anything with you that doesn't matter, it'll weigh you down, you'll be sorry! Now I'm inclined more toward day hikes; Sam and I spent the 4th walking around the perimeter of Lake Coeur D'Alene, and yesterday walked on the interpretive trails at the Ginko Petrified Forest near Vantage. Last year, we camped up at a Forest Service campsite on the Stillaquamish River. The little Honda was stuffed to the gills, and we barely had room on Sam's lap to put the dog. To travel well means to travel light. And we're still a work in progress.

"Let your yoke be easy." I am told that the original meaning of the word interpreted into English as "easy" might better translate as "well-fitting". (And the word "yoke" referred to the apparatus around an ox's neck that put her to work, often to till the land.) Yokes had to be fitted to a particular ox by a yoke maker so that it fit just right, so as not to cause chaffing. Legend has it, in fact, that Jesus could himself have been a yoke-maker; the sign at his place of business might well have read, "Our yokes fit well." As with oxen, so to with us. May all the burdens we bear, all the yokes we wear, be well-fitting ones. Not too light, not too heavy. Not too easy, not too difficult. I like that. God has something for us all to be and do, made to measure, just right. Having tasks to do, a purpose in life is what ultimately makes life worth living. It's not always easy to be and do what God calls us to be and do. There's never too little for us to accomplish, and yet...it doesn't need to be too much for us either. Our yoke can and should be "well-fitted" for us. "The burden we are invited by God in Christ to carry is a just the right size." Which helps us make sense of the earlier part of Matthew, the part in which Jesus speaks about "this generation" being like kids at the mall who pout and stand in the corners and don't want to dance while the music is playing, and then when the news is bad, only drink and get stoned and try to forget. Similarly, many people in Jesus' day didn't like John the Baptist because he was too strict and severe; and they didn't like Jesus because he liked to eat, laugh, and party with the riffraff. People foolishly take on hard yokes and heavy burdens; then, nothing and no one seems appropriate. People and things don't fit well. But, as the Shaker hymn puts it, "When we find ourselves in the place just right, will be in the valley of love and delight." And I believe it. There is a just right place for all of us, a just right time too. Let it be here and now, as we hear the word and lift our hearts to God in prayer. Let it be here and now, as we together share the simple things, the bread and the cup, which spiritually sustain us, for "we are people on a journey, and though pain is with us all the way, joyfully we come together at the holy feast of God."