
Travelling Lightly

Luke 12:32-40

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 7, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery

There's a creation in neuroscience called the brain machine interface or BMI. It allows monkeys to move and control wheelchairs only using their thoughts. Thin electrodes are placed inside the brain and its activity is translated by a computer into the motor commands that control the wheelchair. I wish the journey of life and its direction would be that simple, as simple as a scientific gadget. I wish that we would be able to be our own BMI and control the direction of the Christian journey and experience only what we desire. We wish that we could control our lives and our destiny and we think that we can and know best. But then I see what people post on Facebook at times and write in emails and there are things written online that no one would ever want to put on blast on the jumbotrons of Time Square in Manhattan, NY. We think we know what's best for our futures but the book of Hebrews reminds us that even Abraham "set out, not knowing where he was going." He went but he didn't know where, without a BMI. Let me share a Duke blue newflash today—a lot of the Christian journey is not knowing.

We think we have it all understood, don't we? In the book, *Diary of a Wombat*, a wombat, a creature native to Australia, appears to just eat and sleep. Nothing too impressive at all. But in about a week, this animal gets a human family to feed it the most delicious food and give it a warm place to live. In the end, the wombat says, "[I've] decided that humans are easily trained and make quite good pets." I wonder who was domesticating whom!? I wonder who's in control. We really don't have it all figured out even with BMIs.

I wish I had a biblical BMI to help me make sense of the direction of the thinking of the lectionary planners for this week, why the lectionary planners grouped these particular verses in Luke. No monkey or wombat could figure this out. Verses 32-34 really seem to fit with what goes before it in the discussion about not worrying or having anxiety over material possessions. Verses 35-42 are really about being ready for the coming of the Son of Man. So why put these two ideas together when they seem some distance apart? Why make them one pericope?

Perhaps (and I will tread lightly on this) this union of verses in the Luke passage might be a call to travel lightly on the journey of life until the end. What do I mean? Despite the ways we think we know what's best, we still find ourselves weighted down by the world and the human condition. Weighted down by fear and material possessions. This is why Jesus urges, "Do not be afraid" and "sell your possessions, and give alms." Jesus wants us to release the weight and burdens of life and this is how we prepare for the unexpected coming. This is how we prepare for the end, the future God has for us. We must travel lightly, not buried and trapped by things we've hoarded. Jesus calls us to release our fears and material goods that we might be free enough to travel where God leads. Jesus wants us to travel lightly, which is why he urges the people to not strive after what you will eat or drink but strive for the kingdom.

Releasing the weight of our human existence is actually an act of faith because the things we hold so dear, and ironically, provide a sense of safety—that is, our fears and possessions—are the very things that keep us from traveling free to God. All of this has to do with trust, trusting God. In Hebrews we learn that the great stalwarts of faith all died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They believed the word but did not receive. They were stripped of thinking that getting answers from God was the sole purpose of their faith. Maybe receiving is not the point of the Christian faith, but the believing and seeking is. Maybe traveling to the unknown land at an unexpected hour is the point because we have to give up the idea that we can control our future and its trajectory. We can't even control our present—the weight of it is too much for us. BMIs won't help. Stirring

fears in the media won't help. Building bigger barns of economic prosperity and security won't help. We think we have it all under control; wombats know differently. If the current state of the world is any indication, when we are in control, things get out of control.

But if we travel lightly and trust, we can move faster and farther. If we travel with the heavy sagging weight of the world, we may never reach the city of God. Jesus is adamant that it is the Father's "good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Do we trust and recognize God's good purposes to give us the kingdom? That is, all that is God's can be yours—his garden of delight and unlimited provision, flourishing in which every need is met and more—only if we don't hide from him behind our fears or possessions, hiding behind our stuff.

There's a piece of artwork that I recently saw in which you see the Chapel in the background with five Duke students in the quad area, all juggling various items in an image of a circle. One student is on his back, juggling. Another is sitting on the grass, juggling. One is bicycling, juggling. Another skateboarding, juggling. One just walking, juggling. Regardless of their posture, regardless of their background or where they grew up, all juggle. That's the common denominator. It's curious to see the things that are being juggled in this artwork—an electric guitar, books, laptop, a basketball, clipboard, a slice of cake, a coffee cup, roller blades, an alarm clock, Facebook, a microscope, a football, a slice of pizza, an iPod with headphones in it. All of it being juggled, pointing to how students are always choosing and because of their full schedules, sleep is something that gets in the way.

The director of the Duke Student Wellness Center describes the situation and says that students want to experience everything Duke has to offer so it's difficult to say 'no' to things like clubs or organizations or volunteer community service, or leadership positions. They feel as if they will miss out on something if they say 'No.' But 'No' is a beautiful word and you can say it in so many different ways a la the 'No' button. But it doesn't really matter because according to the wellness center director, when he encounters students he hears "a laundry list of things they're doing, want to do, or perceive as needing to do. And everything they want to do they want to do at the accelerated pace of 110 miles an hour." All of these things are like a basket full of trinkets or gadgets to fill our souls, filling ourselves with things as a way to store up or build treasures or resumes when we should be filling ourselves with God. But this stuff makes us feel powerful and in control and of worth. Somehow we've fooled ourselves into thinking that the more we do, the more we have, the more we matter. We have made things the criteria for a meaningful life. Yet when I hear the words of Jesus—sell, give, do not be afraid—I begin to think that this juggle of things, activities and possessions, is really an attempt to hide ourselves from God or at least distract us from what's really important. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we are too afraid for God to see us as we really are so we store and hoard things to cover up ourselves.

However, it's not more stuff that God wants; it's you that God wants. In a recent interview with a restaurant owner in Maryland whose restaurant was damaged by the flash floods, he was asked what he thought when he saw the lower floor of his restaurant demolished by the storm. His response was that he was glad that many who dined there survived and then he noted that what was destroyed were just things but "people matter." It's actually not the stuff that ensures we matter. It is that we are human which means we matter. That's what gives us worth—human beings created in the image of God.

Traveling lightly in life points to this because after your possessions and fears are gone, after you stop being afraid and sell and give, all that is left is you! In the economy of God, you matter. This is why God wants you to release the things you are holding on to—fears, possessions—God wants you. It's you God desires. It's you God wants. Life is more than food and the body more than clothes—"and how much more value are you than the birds!" (Luke 12:23)

Notice how the prophet Isaiah puts it: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing

offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation-- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash *yourselves*, make *yourselves* clean.” We may dress up the faith with elaborate ritual and protocol and garbs and be trapped in the extraneous accouterments of religious practice and if we do so, we will be lost in the wilderness of possessions when really what God wants is you. Wash yourselves. God doesn’t need or want your possessions. God wants your life, all of it. You.

As you give up or release the weight to travel lightly, you gain more of yourself along the way or parts of yourself that were hiding behind fear or possessions, so what you are storing up as treasure is more of yourself for God. The real treasure is you. “Wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Your heart is in you; therefore treasure yourself because you are the best gift you can offer to God. Not your possessions, not stuff. But your life. Don’t store up treasures for yourselves because you are not for you; you are for God. And you have a treasure in an earthen vessel (2 Cor 4).

Another way of saying this is that God wants you naked. God wants you to return to Eden, traveling lightly, going with nothing but yourself, returning to an utopian garden where you came as yourself and not what you projected and not where you have to hide behind your stuff because in Eden, because in the end, God wants you. Christian writer and pastor Brian McLaren calls this “naked spirituality.” Honest, vulnerable, unashamed, transparent, no posturing, no attempts to impress, just free to be who God made us to be, rediscovering the treasure lost in Eden. In scientific studies on microbiomes, they say that a little dirt won’t hurt us but actually help your immune system so there’s encouragement for humans to get closer to dirt. In traveling lightly on the path to holy nakedness back to Eden, it is a return to the dirt, the soil, from whence we’ve come.

When you travel lightly, you get closer to *adam*, closer to ‘the earth,’ that you might be ready for home. And who wouldn’t want to go there? Francis Bacon once said, in a quote you can find in Duke Gardens—“God Almighty first planted a garden, and indeed it is the purest of human pleasures.” It is the Father’s pleasure to give you the kingdom, the eternal garden, but you have to be willing to release the weight you’ve been holding so that you can give yourself wholly to God and find your whole self. (We need less of the juggle image and more of open arms of release/praise)

It’s you that God wants and truly that’s all we can take with us in the end to God’s luscious garden.

*Give to the winds thy fears,
Hope and be undismayed,
God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears,
God shall lift up thy head.*

*Still heavy is thy heart,
Still sink thy spirits down;
Cast off the weight, let fear depart,
And every care be gone.*

*What though thou rulest not,
Yet heaven, and earth, and hell,
Proclaim, God sitteth on the throne,
And ruleth all things well.*