

What To Do With the Baggage of Life

Psalm 97
Matthew 18:21-35

September 17, 2017
Faith Community

Back in 2005, Fran and I had a wonderful overseas adventure. We exchanged houses and churches with a clergy couple in Scotland for a month. It was a delightful little town, home of James Barrie, creator of Peter Pan, and also of Bon Scott, front man of the hard rock band AC/DC, which is an interesting combination all its own. After our time there, we took off on our own for a couple weeks in London and Paris.

Starting in London, we landed at Heathrow Airport. To get to our downtown hotel, I thought it wise to take the Underground, London's subway system, instead of a cab. After all, it was efficient; there was a stop close to our hotel, and think of the money we'll save, all of which demonstrated my wisdom, common sense and great discernment. So we set out, and were greeted by a number of surprises along the way.

Our first surprise was that the stop near our hotel was closed. Actually, a whole bunch of stops were shut down in that area. Well, OK, we'll see how close we can get, but it still shouldn't be too hard. Keep in mind, please; we had six weeks' worth of luggage with us.

Our second surprise was that the London Underground was woefully ill equipped for passengers with special needs. Six weeks' worth of luggage created a very special need. There were steps to be negotiated getting on and off each train.

Also, since a number of stops were closed, we had to transfer from one line to another, which meant we had to go between different levels, which meant going up and down stairs each time. Lots of stairs. Six weeks' worth of luggage! There were no escalators in our part of the London Underground.

Well, at long last, we arrived at our stop. Down from the train to the platform, but this time with great relief. We were quickly reminded, however, that it's called the Underground for a reason.

Are you familiar with the steps leading up to the Lincoln Memorial and the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C.? Put them together, and you have an idea of the steps

leading up to street level from the London Underground, for us and our six weeks' worth of luggage.

Remember the wisdom, common sense and great discernment I spoke of a moment ago? That had lost a bit of its luster by now, especially on the part of my traveling companion.

A kindly fellow passenger came along who couldn't help but see the fire emanating from this attractive lady, directed at some poor, befuddled, and perfectly wretched soul. Said kindly passenger helped us get it all above ground.

The UK has a reputation of being foggy, cool, and damp. Not during the summer of '05. It was blazing that year. And we soon realized that we had a long journey yet to our hotel, and vast hordes of humanity to navigate, all of whom were, not doubt, thinking or saying as they saw us, "American tourists for sure."

At long last the Promised Land was in sight, and there was great rejoicing among we pilgrims, until we arrived, weak and heavy laden, to the main entrance for our final surprise.

Are you familiar with the steps leading up to the Lincoln Memorial and the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C.? Put them together, and you have an idea of the steps leading to the entrance to our hotel.

We had a quick dinner, lumbered back to our non-air conditioned room that opened upon a crowded, noisy courtyard that stayed that way most of the night, collapsed upon our bed fully clothed, and remained motionless until morning.

Baggage.

Today's New Testament reading tells of a man with lots of baggage in the form of an enormous debt that he could not repay. Back in those days you went to jail until you could pay off your debt, which seems rather counter productive, but such was the case, and it was about to happen to this man.

Friends, we all have baggage, don't we? We all have stuff that we lug around and that slows us down and maybe even keeps us from moving at all.

It might be six weeks' worth of luggage or, more importantly, it can take the form of guilt over something we've done or deep woundedness over something that's happened to us or to someone we love.

Over time, however, the bags get heavier or maybe start piling on top of each other, or the wheels break, or who knows what else.

If we don't deal with it in a healthy way, we can become defined by our baggage. The guilt or woundedness takes on mythic proportions, and lugging this stuff around becomes part of who we are. Life is one 'if only' after another.

That's because some of us really don't want to lose our baggage. We know this because sometimes the 'if only's' are granted, but nothing really changes. Something else comes up. Case in point: our friend in Jesus' story. His 'if only' is granted. That enormous debt is wiped clean. It's a tremendous gift, an incredible release, a fantastic freedom. But on a deeper level, things don't change:

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. (Matthew 18:28-31)

The true measure of a person's character is often found in how he or she responds to good times. When things are tough we hunker down, come together, sometimes even fill our churches. When all is well, watch out. We fall victim to selective memory, we become like everyone else, and we're destroyed by our idolatry.

The same thing happens in this story. The man is blessed tremendously but does not pass it on. The guy who let our indebted friend off the hook is tipped off, and the debtor gets thrown in jail.

Now comes the punchline. Jesus says,

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart.

(Matthew 18:35)

If we all have baggage, and if we can become defined by our baggage, here's what I think we do well to do; learn from and let go of your baggage.

This is where we're tempted to get a bit testy. After all, the baggage keeps getting heavier. The little wheels fell off long ago. I've gotten lopsided carrying it around all this time. It's even affected my health, and I'm supposed to forgive and forget?

No. You're not supposed to forget. Otherwise, how would you learn anything? You're not supposed to forget. Instead, you're supposed to be set free.

Years ago a small group of us came up with a different understanding of forgiveness:

"I will not allow someone or something or some event to have power over me."

The person who forgives is the person who is set free, because that person knows what has been done on his/her behalf and is willing to pass it on.

Otherwise, as our friend in the parable discovered, you'll end up in a prison of your own making.

There's a passage in the New Testament book of Romans that reads,

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:20-21)

That's because any other approach does not work. Friends, I have never come across anyone who experienced true release from anger or bitterness by getting back at someone, whether it happens in a school playground or in ethnic warfare.

Then in Luke 6 we find Jesus saying,

Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. (The Message)

Love is seeking God's best for others and for self. Imagine being freed from the impossible burden of having to get even. That's a contradiction in and of itself, since there is no even.

Instead,

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:20-21)

It could be the most difficult thing you'll ever do. It could also save your life.