

“The Things They Carried”

Joshua 1:9 & Matthew 11:28-30

August 21, 2016 ~ Blessing of the Backpacks ~ Pastor Jo Ramsey

About 25 years ago, novelist Tim O'Brien wrote a novel called The Things They Carried about his experience in the Vietnam War. Some of you teens will recognize this book from Mrs. Koon's tenth grade English class. The Things They Carried is now considered the preeminent piece of Vietnam War literature and an excellent example of what's called 'metafiction' – it self-consciously refers to itself and questions the relationship between fiction and reality.

In The Things They Carried, O'Brien shares his experience in the 23rd infantry division by following the members of the Alpha Company, his platoon in the Vietnam War. He blends real people and events with fictionalized stories, stringing them together like beads in a necklace.

But for me the real brilliance of O'Brien novel is his technique---he brings the reality and experience of war to life by describing the things these young men carried in their backpacks. Mementos like letters and pictures, necessities like tooth brushes and pocket knives, treats like Kool Aid and M&Ms, items belonging to soldiers like machine guns, boots and flack jackets, and objects based on one's duty like machetes, morphine and maps. O'Brien specifies the exact weight of these things-- giving a very tangible idea of what it was like to carry, to struggle under, such burdens.

But in addition to these very real items, O'Brien observes that the soldiers also carry themselves, their grief, terror, love and longing, memories and secrets---emotional baggage--intangibles which have their own mass and gravity. These are the heaviest burdens of all – the memories of the fear they experience and the things they did. So for a moment, we want to remember and honor those men and women, and all who have served our country, for the things they carried, and still carry today.

Today we celebrate Backpack Sunday, and rather than army green, our kids will carry backpacks of every color. Thankfully, they are headed to school this fall, and not to a battlefield. But all us, whether we're off to school or to work or just to the grocery, carry something with us along our journey... a purse, a wallet, a briefcase or diaper bag, or even just our phone.

Just like the soldiers in Tim O'Brien's novel our bundles are filled with both our belongings and burdens...things tangible and intangible...our treasures, things that define us, things that comfort us, that we might need, things that we lug around (sometimes to our own detriment).

I'm sure nearly every woman here has carried a purse at one time or another, and very likely you have been forced to play that icebreaker party game---The one where you pull out something from your purse to introduce yourself. You have to share what it is, why it's important to you, and why you wouldn't leave home without it. Sort of like that Capital One commercial...you know...“What's in your wallet?”

So I ask you, what did you carry here this morning? If you had to choose one thing to introduce yourself from your purse or wallet or backpack, what would it be? (Don't worry—you don't have to share!)

- A photograph of someone you love
- An i.d. badge
- A piece of jewelry

Or maybe you're carrying something more intangible,

- A particular memory---good or bad
- Something that you're struggling with---some conflict or grief
- Or an event you're anticipating—with anxiety or perhaps with anticipation.

What we carry says a lot about who we are, and whose we are...

Jesus has a good deal to say about the things we carry. In fact, the whole Bible talks a lot about who and what we carry, as well as who and what Jesus carries. In the New Testament alone, there are more than 21 words that mean 'carry,' like Eskimos have 15 different words for snow. They each convey various nuances of 'carrying'---that is, to carry away, to carry forth, to bear, to pick up and to lead. Today's Matthew passage uses **phortizo** which means to carry too much, to be overloaded or burdened. Without cars or bicycles or indoor plumbing---these people did a lot of carrying---of water, supplies, even themselves. They knew about burdens.

God knows even we carry too much. We carry the wrong things and we forget to carry what really matters! Let's look at our passage from Matthew.

First, Jesus knows that we carry our pain & our problems...

We are 'heavily burdened.' We have a fair share of problems, don't we?! Every single person here has faced something difficult, even our young ones. Some of us have lost someone we love or watched a significant relationship crumble. Others have lost their job or home. Some have seen their physical or emotional health deteriorate, and are frustrated by the loss of their independence or the way things used to be. We worry about our kids, our parents, our friends, ourselves. Many of us feel helpless to make things better – be it close to home or far away.

Jesus understands that we lug around many fears and frustrations, sorrows and stresses. At times we stagger until their weight, and sometimes, we just can't go any farther. We wonder how we'll take another step.

Jesus says, you don't have to go it alone. "Come to me," he says, "and I will give you rest." God wants us to carry our pain and problems to him, and set them down. Give them over and God will hold them in hand.

This 'letting go' doesn't erase our troubles or solve our problems. It simply makes room for hope to grow. It allows peace to seep into the soil of our heart.

Second, Jesus knows we carry the pressure of perfection and the reality of sin...in other words, we carry the law.

Our passage about burdens appears in the middle of a whole section about the law...What does God's law really mean? When does it apply? What is truly faithful? This is all that healing on the Sabbath stuff. Jesus knows we struggle under the weight of law.

Bottom line: To 'carry the law' is to believe that somehow what we do makes God love us. If we follow the rules, we think we can be good enough. We can grow proud and self-righteous. But if we fail, we become weighed down with guilt, or maybe just give up entirely.

Either way, Jesus says set down the law, the pressure of perfection. Set down guilt. Set down pride.

You see, we don't have to carry around the law anymore. Jesus has lifted that burden from us, and placed it on his own back. He carries our sin to the cross. He takes our infirmities and iniquities upon himself. Nearly every Sunday, you hear us say, "Jesus bore (carried) our sins in his body on the cross." We don't need to lug around what Jesus buried in the tomb.

This is grace! This is freedom! This yoke is light and we can find rest for our souls.

Finally, Jesus knows we carry our own particular past:

Which is normal...Our history makes us who we are, doesn't it? We have a past... (some of us have more of a past than others!) We have stories, memories, relationships, experiences, commitments, joys and sorrows, failures and triumphs. We also have our cultural background, our education and class.

All of this past is important. It makes us who we are. But, God knows none of this should define us, distract us, hold us back or slow us down.

Too many of us, who say, "I'm just a just a girl, just a single mom, just an old man, just a widow. I'm just a townie or just an outsider. I'm just a nerd. I'm just weak. I just come from a broken family. I'm just a 'fill-in-the-blank.'

We let labels, the expectations of others, and the negative voices in our heads weigh us down. Yet, in Jesus Christ, we are a new creation. The old life has gone, behold the new life has begun! We have a new identity in Christ. We are a child of God, follower of Jesus, a disciple. We don't need to let yesterday take up too much of today, like driving around looking in the rear view mirror. God is doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?!

Jesus asks us to set down our past, so we can take up our new calling, so we can learn from Jesus, so we can embrace today. We are called to carry the Good News in all we do and say, to show God's love to a broken and suffering world.

Today, as we think about the things we carry...our problems and pain, the pressure of perfection, and the reality of our sin, even our own particular pasts, we need to remember that Jesus has a new packing list for us: Peace and hope, grace and freedom, and ultimately brand new id badge! We are disciples—ready to follow Jesus on a new mission, to take a new path, into a new day...Even the first day of school!

So, as we turn toward Blessing the Backpacks, I want to remind you...No matter what you carry...or what you do not carry...no matter whether you're "heavily burdened" or "your burden is light," ... no matter where you have been or where you are going...God goes with you. God walks beside you into the daycare and into the doctor's office, into the school and into shelter, into the factory and into the facility, into the play group and into the principal's office. God will help us bear 'the things we carry,' and during our darkest times, God will even carry us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.