

Covenant Word

The Things We Carry

Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; I Timothy 6:6-16; Luke 20:27-40

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
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Pastor
Sunday
November 11, 2007*

The night began with an air of excitement. It was David's birthday. Not just any birthday...it was David's eighteenth birthday. The family came to congratulate him. There was birthday cake and ice cream. Presents were exchanged. We sang "Happy Birthday" with gusto. And then an uncle, an uncle whose gentle spirit always has a special place within my heart, put his hands on David's shoulders and said, "Yea...I remember turning eighteen! Time to go down to the courthouse and register to vote. Time to go to the post office and register with the draft."

That day that the Sadducees tried to trap Jesus with a question about the resurrection, Jesus moved them from the trivial to the ultimate as well.

Innocently, I asked, "The draft? Is that still required?" And every male in the room looked at me as if I were daft. In the awkward silence that followed, I gathered up the discarded ribbons and torn paper. I took it outside to the garbage cans. And as I stood under the stars, I found it hard to breathe. How did we move so quickly from cowboy to combat boots? How did we get from handing my child crayons and glue and glitter and construction paper to handing him a weapon? How did we get from a child who still has a curfew to a person whose life or death responsibility is to defend our freedom? In the span of a few moments, I moved quickly from the trivial occasion of a birthday to the ultimate questions about life and death, war and peace.

That day that the Sadducees tried to trap Jesus with a question about the resurrection, Jesus moved them from the trivial to the ultimate as well.

They posed a contrived situation that reflected the cultural laws of the day. (Exegesis taken from Will Willimon, "Seven Weddings and a Resurrection," Pulpit Resource, Nov. 11, 2007) They approached Jesus with, "Teacher, the scriptures say that if a man dies and leaves a wife but no child, then his brother is obligated to marry his widowed sister-in-law and have children so that his dead brother can have heirs. So let's say, for argument's sake, of course, that there once were seven brothers. The first one got

married, but died before he had children. The second brother married his widowed sister-in-law and then he died, then the third brother married her. He died. Eventually, all seven married her, but not a one of the brothers conceived a child. Then the wife died. Since, in this life, she had been married to all seven brothers, in the resurrection, whose wife will she be?"

Now, you and I know that questions like: what came first the chicken or the egg; or can God create a rock so big that God can't lift it; or whose wife will this woman be in heaven when she has been married to seven brothers consecutively, are deadly to the spiritual life. They are deadly, because they are disconnected to the realities of flesh and blood living. They make a mockery of faith by legitimizing the spurious idea that such trivia has spiritual value. The Sadducees' question also makes ideological use of a person with whom they would never consider being in relationship. (Steve Frazier, "Pastoral Implications," Lectionary Homiletics, Nov. 11, 2007)

So for Jesus to even give the Sadducees' question any regard at all is a startling act of grace. Jesus basically tells them the same thing he embodies to the Samaritan woman at the well and to the circle of men who bring a woman caught in the act of adultery before him for their justification.

He sends the same messages in each situation that they should leave the women alone, quit asking the trivial, and deal with the ultimate questions at hand.

His comments point the Sadducees, and those listening, to the truth that the rules of existing in a resurrected life are completely different from our earthly existence. Case in point, there will be no need for marriage. Then Jesus talks of being children of God and in so doing, He points us beyond the stereotypical social usefulness of women to the ultimate place of belonging for each of us. When Jesus talks of resurrection, He points us to a life that stands in juxtaposition to this life with the only certainty for us being that God desires to be in relationship with us for all of eternity. We know that at that time, all that is contingent, all that is cultural, all that is political, and all that is religious will fall away. Only what is real will remain, and what is real is God's love. God's love will characterize all relationships and transfigure our faces so that we are recognizable as the children of God. (Paul Duke, "Living by the Word," The Christian Century, Oct. 25, 1995)

By drawing on their rather generous view of themselves, Jesus entices the Sadducees to consider the deepest human question, in other words, that death is not the end. It is the beginning of how things ought to really be. Therefore, the trivial



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question raised by the Sadducees, suddenly becomes an opportunity to turn despair into hope. It is especially good news for any social outcasts that there is a place for them within the kingdom of God, and it is especially hopeful for those who are coming to the close of their lives, for those who are fearful of losing a loved one, and for those who have witnessed the power of death on a large scale such as during a natural disaster or in war. (Frazier)

Therefore, the trivial question raised by the Sadducees, suddenly becomes an opportunity to turn despair into hope.

Now I have wanted for some time to make a statement about the war in Iraq. I kept thinking that I could learn enough about it to make an educated statement. I find, instead, that when research is attempted that our newspapers are more likely to carry headlines about football and newscasts rarely lead with a story about what is going on.

I kept thinking that I would have some keen insight that would empower me to speak out courageously. I find, instead, that with each day, I get more confused and thus more timid to voice any opinion at all.

I kept thinking that something would happen to so incense me that whatever I had to say could not be refuted. We could all agree without question. I find, instead, that this particular war is an extremely touchy subject, and that even the sentiments in this room would represent not only the extremes, but all the points in-between.

It seems to me that I have been caught up in dealing with the trivial when greater issues of life and death, war and peace were clamoring for my attention.

I can remember riding in the car with my father when I was in grade school. We were studying World War II in history, and so I asked my father where he had served. He explained to me that he was a seminary student during the war, and so he was excused from duty. While my young mind recognized that being a seminarian was lofty and that it was considered an excused absence by the United States government, I remember feeling ashamed that my father had not served like so many of my classmate's fathers.

Then my sister married a Marine. He served in Viet Nam, and her daily vigil of watching for the mailman began to teach me the personal lessons of fear, anguish, loneliness and the ability to live gracefully with uncertainty. I remember that she sent him an Easter basket one year. It was one of the few care packages that arrived in a timely manner. He, in turn, had a buddy take pictures of him with the basket and its contents displayed along the top of the sand bags that lined his bunker. I remember noticing the stark contrast of those pastels against the browns and greens; the innocence of an Easter basket against the backdrop of the horror of war. We did not know until later that my brother-in-law tucked the small, stuffed bunny from that basket into his duffel. He carried it with him all over Viet Nam, and then to North Carolina, until it finally found its place in the living room of my sister's house in Alabama.

It reminded me of Tim O'Brien's book, The Things They Carried. In the first chapter, the reader is introduced to a company of soldiers who are making their way through the jungles of Viet Nam. While there might be ambiguity about the purpose of their missions, there was one single abiding certainty. It was that they would never be at a loss for things to carry. In

addition to their weapons and ammunition, rations and mine detector, they shared the weight of memory, taking up what others could no longer bear. They carried each other, the wounded and the weak. They carried disease, lice, ringworm, leeches and various rots and molds. They carried chess sets, basketballs, Vietnamese-English dictionaries, letters from home and pictures of loved ones.

They carried the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing, shame—these were intangibles, but even they had their own mass and specific gravity. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down. It required perfect balance and perfect posture. They carried their reputations. And they carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of showing the blush of personal dishonor.

So each morning, they made their legs move. They endured. They kept carrying all that they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.

Do we know the power of the things that we carry?

Like the Sadducees are we so full of self-importance, that our pomposity and arrogance turn into systems of might makes right, winning at any cost, and personal and national attitudes of entitlement?

Does our righteousness create conflict by drawing lines that are unnecessary and exclusionary?

Does our quest for knowledge keep us focused on the minor, trivial things rather than major issues of such importance that another's eternity is at stake?

It seems to me that I have been caught up in dealing with the trivial when greater issues of life and death, war and peace were clamoring for my attention.

What if we were to dump these things and instead, carry the attributes that Paul mentions in his letter to Timothy?

What if we laid down our own self-fascination and carried a humble desire to be god-like?

What if we put aside our need for concrete answers and carried faith in the things that are beyond us, like resurrection and eternity and being children of God?

What if we dumped our caddy evaluations of one another, our stereotypes of those who are different from us and began instead to look for the vast ways we are similar by carrying love?

What if we gave up the ways we are unfaithful and disloyal and chose to carry steadfastness?

What if we refused violence of any sort and carried only gentleness?

It seems to me that if we did any one of these things, we would be closer to peace than the war that haunts us.

A few Sundays ago, I went to Linn Park after church. The Quakers were hosting a memorial to the war. I was moved by

the reading of American AND Iraqi names. My heart felt a tug when I stood beside shoes that were tagged with the names of a three year old and a twelve year old that had died in the war. But what stirred me the most was that no one else was there.

To name the dead: those who have given their lives believing that they died for our protection, to save us from our enemies and to shield us from terror; to name those whose lives have been taken

because war has consumed their homeland with its rude manners and voracious appetites. **To name the dead is not a matter of being for or against the war. It is a matter of remembering.**

Remembering that our lives are bound up with all other lives in Christ, as we keep count of those who are worth more than the fallen sparrow, of which scripture tells us that even God keeps a record. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Naming the Dead," Christian Century, July 24, 2007)

To name the dead is a matter of moving beyond the trivial and facing the deepest issues of life and death. **To name the dead is a matter** of carrying with us godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness in order to confront injustice, so that all people may claim their inheritance and be celebrated as worthy, children of God.

So this morning, I would ask that if we are able, let us stand out of respect for these who are now equal to the angels, and children of the resurrection. The names that will be called out are the names of soldiers who have died this year in Iraq and who are from the state of Alabama. Let us listen to each name that is called, and as the bell tolls, may our prayers be that we will be peacemakers as we pick up and carry godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness.

Army Private Johnathon M. Millican of Trafford, Alabama. He was 20 when he died in Iraq on January 20.*

Army chief Warrant Officer Keith Yoakum of Coffe Springs, Alabama. He was 41 when he died in Iraq on February 2.*

Army Captain Donnie R. Belser from Anniston, Alabama. He was 28 when he died in Iraq on February 10.*

Army Sergeant Curtis E. Clawson, jr of Daleville, Alabama. He was 20 when he died in Iraq on March 20.*

Army Staff Sergeant Harrison Brown from Prichard, Alabama. He was 31 when he died in Iraq on April 8.*

Army Specialist James T. Lindsey of Florence, Alabama. He was 20 when he died in Iraq on April 12.*

Marine Lance Corporal Adam E. Loggins of Athens, Alabama. He was 27 when he died in Iraq on April 26.*

Army specialist Matthew T. Bolar from Montgomery, Alabama. He was 24 when he died in Irag on May 3.*

Army Specialist Joseph A. Gilmore of Hartford, Alabama. He was 26 when he died in Iraq on May 19.*

Army Sergeant Jean P. Meldin of Pelham, Alabama. He was 27 when he died in Iraq on May 19.*

Marine Sergeant Nicholas R. Walsh of Birmingham, Alabama. He was 27 when he died in Iraq on May 26.*

Army Sergeant Brandon E. Hadaway of Valley, Alabama. He was 25 when he died in Iraq on May 30.*

Marine Lieutenant Colonel Michael A. Robinson of Sylacauga, Alabama. He was 42 when he died in Iraq on June 1.*

Army Sergeant William E. Brown from Phil Campbell, Alabama. He was 25 when he died in Iraq on June 23.*

Army Private First Class James J.

Harrelson of Dadeville, Alabama. He was 19 when he died in Iraq on July 17.*

Army Specialist Richard Gilmore III of Jasper, Alabama. He was 22 when he died in Iraq on July 18.*

Army Sargeant Eric D. Cottrell from Pittsview, Alabama. He was 39 when he died in Iraq on August 13.*

*denotes that a chime is rung in memory of the soldier

Let us pray:

We carry these names with us, oh Lord as reminders of the many who have died as soldiers and for the many who have fallen because war occurred in their particular village. We recognize that there are many ways to bring about peace in this world. But this morning, we put aside grand theories in order to find a beginning point within our own hearts and minds and spirits. As we consider decisions of faith, may we decide to bring an end to our own internal wars by placing our trust in You. May we readily acknowledge our place as Your children and find Your love as the source of our strength, courage and conviction. Then, oh Lord, we ask that You move within us to carry Your love, gentleness, steadfastness, faith and godlikeness into our relationships, so that Your Spirit will permeate our skirmishes and bring peaceful resolution. Though often sung without much thought, we pray that there will be peace on earth and that somehow through Your mysterious workings that this peace might be encouraged because of who we are as Your followers. Remove our apathy; forgive our sinfulness; and enable us to see ourselves and all persons in this world as Your children, sons and daughters of the resurrection.

We ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, who also died for our sakes, Amen.