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Among the many treasures of historical significance kept in the Smithsonian, there is a walking stick that represents the celebration of the United States Independence from Great Briton and the message of today's Gospel lesson.

This walking stick belonged to Benjamin Franklin, one of our country's founding fathers and signers of the Declaration of Independence. It is made of wood from a crab apple tree and was a gift from a French woman who supported the United States revolution. What makes this walking stick significant is not that it came from a French woman, nor the type of wood it is made from. Its significance is in its top, fashioned out of gold, called the "cap of independence."

If you were to look at it, the gold top doesn't look like much of anything. It is a blob of metal with a slight bump at the top. But when you hear the story behind it, it makes a lot of sense.

One of the many roles Benjamin Franklin held was that of Ambassador to France, one of the United States supporters. The climate of France could be cold, and to keep his head warm, Franklin wore a fur hat. It was not special in any way, and common back in the United States; yet the French were quite taken by it. To them, it represented their rustic opinion of Americans, that we are all hardy, resourceful, and closer to nature than Europeans.

So when Countess Maria-Anne Forbach commissioned the walking stick as a gift for Benjamin Franklin in 1783, instead of topping it with the crown of a king, or the powdered wig of an aristocrat, or the top hat of that guy on the Monopoly game, she chose a hat that represented the United States independence from such things and had it fashioned into the fur hat worn by American people regardless of their station or profession.

According to historians, Franklin was very proud of the walking stick and what it represents. Not only because he used walking sticks and other aides because gout made walking painful for him, but because to him this unique walking stick represented how American Independence from British rule meant Americans needed to lean on each other and support one another. In fact, he felt the walking stick was so important, in his will he bequeathed it to none other than George Washington, writing words to the effect that a king has a scepter, but this walking stick is appropriate for the leader of the United States.

Walking sticks, both practical and symbolic, have been part of humanity for millennia. All cultures have names and uses for them. They are frequently mentioned in the Bible, where they are usually translated as staff instead of walking stick. If you do a search for staff in the Bible, you will find they are mentioned 79 times, from Genesis all the way through to Revelation, and one of those times is in today's Gospel where Jesus sends the disciples out in pairs to spread his message, telling them the only thing they can take with them besides each other and the clothes on their backs is a staff, or a walking stick.

Like Benjamin Franklin's walking stick, Jesus' instructions have a powerful significance. Those walking sticks his disciples carried were symbolic of his message and the source of their authority, and his.

All the significant leaders of Israel carried walking sticks. Moses' shepherd's staff was transformed by God to represent Moses' authority to lead God's people out of slavery under Pharaoh of Egypt into freedom. In the story of Exodus, on the night of the Passover, the people were instructed to eat the Passover meal quickly, with their walking sticks in their hands. Moses' brother Aaraon threw his walking stick down in front of the Egyptian magicians who magically transformed their walking sticks

into snakes, only to have Aaron's walking stick turn into a snake that ate theirs, revealing God is more powerful than magic tricks.

Jacob used a walking stick for support, as did many people in the days when the most common form of transportation was walking. King David used a walking stick for both support and to symbolize his authority came from God, not his accomplishments. The prophet Elijah used his walking stick to wave over people when giving them a blessing. The prophet Ezekiel had a vision where God instructed him to use a walking stick to measure the dimensions for a new house of worship.

Throughout the Bible, walking sticks are intended to be used for support, to measure holy places, and to represent a person's authority coming from God, that no matter who we are, we all lean on, or depend on God. In some parts of the Bible severe penalties are given to people who misused their walking stick for acts of violence.

So, when Jesus sent his disciples out with no food, no water, no money or extra clothing, and only their walking sticks and each other, he was sending them out as powerful symbols of God's Kingdom coming into the world. The walking sticks represented the words the disciples preached and any healing they did were God acting through them. Without food, clothing, or money, they were dependent on the generosity of others, especially those who recognized the disciples were not taking advantage of people but embodying how loving God means loving each other by caring for each other. Walking sticks represent God's Kingdom because God's Kingdom is not a political machine or monarchy that uses power and wealth to take over and dominate. God's Kingdom is humble, dependent on people to make room for each other, which is how it grows.

As our 4th of July holiday weekend draws to a close, perhaps it is good to turn our attention away from parades, cookouts, and fireworks for a moment and consider walking sticks and those who use them. These days we don't tend to think of walking sticks as symbols of authority, but as weakness. But is it really a weakness if someone uses a tool that helps even out their gait, provides support, or alleviates pain so they can walk farther and stand longer? I see that as being smart and resourceful, like Benjamin Franklin whose walking stick allowed him to travel, give speeches, and represent the United States both at home and overseas.

When we also consider how walking sticks have represented God's presence with people on their long journey to freedom, or the dimensions of places of worship, or Jesus' disciples bringing messages of God's love and healing, perhaps when we see someone use a cane or trekking pole or walker, or when we need to use them ourselves, we can step back and recognize God is with us, equipping and empowering us to be God's love in the world by reminding people when life gets hard, or scary, or uncertain, we have God's love to lean on. And when life is full of joy, we have God to thank. Which means, when ever we see a walking stick God's Kingdom of heaven might be a little closer than we thought.