

WHAT SHOES ARE YOU WEARING? Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Ephesians 6:10-20

My friend and colleague has a son who, due to autism, does not speak. In their home much of the communication is non-verbal. Each morning the first thing Joey does is check out his shoes! He's learned that the shoes they have on speak volumes about the day ahead. Dress shoes mean work or church. Scuffed slip-ons mean a casual, more relaxed day around the house. He really loves it when they have tennis shoes on, because he knows it means going to the park or a hike, both of which he loves.

In his book, *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner writes, "If you want to know who you really are as distinct from whom you like to think you are, keep an eye on where your feet take you." If peace is the goal, our feet, not our words, will get us there. The author of Ephesians doesn't commit to any one style of shoe as THE most appropriate for spreading the gospel of peace. I suppose wing-tips or high heeled pumps will do; even Crocs or Birkenstocks. But my experience is that spreading peace is hard work. My money would be on work boots as the best, maybe even a pair with steel toes. I really don't think the kind of shoes you wear is important, however, I do think that as Christians, we MUST be prepared to do the work that Christ calls us to do. That requires appropriate preparation.

In this passage from the Letter to the Ephesians the writer uses imagery common in that day and time – the Roman soldier – to outline how disciples should prepare themselves to proclaim the Word of God. As Jesus had commanded – Go, therefore, into all the world, making disciples, proclaiming the Good News, and baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Inasmuch as we are disciples who are commanded to do that in this day and age, let's look at the instructions to the people of Ephesus in our terms – here in the Twenty-First Century. First, the writer appropriates the common parts of armor - belt, breastplate, shield – but he assigns them values uncommon for that day: truth, righteousness, faith. Consequently, the armor, usually a symbol of self-reliance, is transformed into a symbol of utter dependence on God.

What does it mean for a congregation to be radically dependent upon God and to live a transformed life in Christ? The implication of Ephesians 6:10 is clear: God's grace has enemies; God's justice has a bounty on its head; God's peace is marked for attempted demolition. We are known by our associations, and when we hobnob with known forgivers and peace-mongers we must expect a strong reaction from those who traffic in accusations and innuendo.

And so, how do we prepare ourselves for the work we are called to do? First, we put on the WHOLE armor. We can't be committed disciples and only partially prepare. We must put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes that proclaim peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and carry the sword of the Word of God and prayer. I know some folks who wear the breastplate of righteousness but do not wear the shoes that proclaim peace. Likewise, I have met those who wear the shoes that proclaim peace but the shield of faith is not a part of their wardrobe. It take it all – the whole package – the whole armor of God. So what are you wearing?

I had a friend – well an acquaintance really – whom I called Two-phone Joe. The first time I met him, I was sitting outside a local coffee shop, sipping and reading. He came out of the shop, cell phone pressed between shoulder and ear, talking a blue streak. He had a cup of coffee in one hand and a Coke in the other, and another phone strapped to his belt. AS he sat his coffee down to hang up his phone, I said, "Man, you need to relax a little!" And that was our introduction. We talked each morning. Well,

actually Joe raved and I listened with gratitude that serving a church congregation in deep conflict was far more relaxing than whatever Joe did for a living. One morning I was seated at an inside table when Joe came in, assaulting his phone as usual. He was loud, rude, and everyone around him could hear all that he was saying. When he finally hung up and came to my table, I said to him, "Joe, sit down. I need to talk to you." Guardedly, he responded, "What's up? You sound serious." "I am. Joe, I have no idea if anyone has ever done this for you, but I feel compelled to pray for you right now. If you do not slow down and calm down, you will die of a heart attack before God is through with you." Joe sat down and I prayed. When I finished the prayer in which I asked God to slow Joe down, to calm him down and to give him words of peace, hope and love, Joe's eyes were wide and he looked at me as if I was crazy. "Thank you," Joe said softly. I wondered if that may have been the first time anyone had prayed for Joe. What I do know is that from that day forward Joe came in, talking on the phone in a softer tone, got his coffee and came to my table to talk quietly while we drank our Java. That prayer changed him – at least in the coffee shop.

Though the writer of Ephesians uses warrior language and armor imagery, we are not called to beat people over the head with our truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, or the Word of God and prayer. We prepare OURSELVES with these – not to use as weapons – but because we cannot do it alone. God calls us to a very difficult job and we cannot do it without God to lead and guide us. Paul is talking about Christian identity and the roots of our common faith. In order to stand firm, we have to be nurtured in a tradition, a faithful community, and grow deep in its rich soil.

Years ago Marva Dawn gave a Bible study in which she talked about the language in the old hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers," reminding us that following Christ Jesus by praying for our enemies, turning the other cheek, forgiving endlessly, etc., is in many respects to live embattled. It is not to fight against other people. It is not a triumphal war to form a Christian government. It is not a struggle opposing non-Christians or back-sliders or even one's own petty and enormous inabilities. The task is much bigger.

The "whole armor of God" is needed for the war against the principalities and powers, and against the forces of sin, our own separation from the Holy One, our own desires for what does not feed and nourish God's creation. Those are our enemies.

Why do we want others to come and worship in this place with us? Why do we want to encourage others to be present with us for worship, for study and fellowship? It is so that we can help others as we all put on the WHOLE Armor of God so that we are not separated from the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit; so that we can be nurtured and can grow in faith, in knowledge of truth, firm in the Word and in prayer; and experience first – hand the salvation that is ours through Christ our Lord.

So, the question for today: What shoes are you wearing?