

SERMON: Wearing Used Shoes

TEXT: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

“Why would you want to wear someone else’s shoes?” This is a question that one very wise person put to my friend, Amy, many years ago.

Amy and I were in seminary together, and she had just been hired at a nearby church to do an internship. The student who had previously held that position was apparently very well-loved by the congregation and by all accounts had done an exceptional job. They were all sorry to lose him.

So, when Amy interviewed for the job, and then met with the Senior Pastor, and began meeting some of the parishioners, one particular refrain was repeated to her over and over again. “You have big shoes to fill.” The more she heard this, the more nervous and self-conscious Amy became. She began to second-guess herself; she was losing all her self-confidence.

Finally, after hearing her share these feelings of inadequacy – and knowing what an exceptional, talented, and intelligent person she was in her own right – another friend simply posed the question: “Amy, why would you want to wear someone else’s shoes?”

The essence of the question – which, by the way, did the trick in helping Amy find her confidence again – was that she wasn't really meant to fill those "big shoes" that everyone talked about. She would be much better off wearing her own shoes: being herself, sharing her own special gifts, pastoring and preaching in her own way, with her own style, the best way she knew how. She was her own person and there was no good reason why she should try to be just like someone else.

Amy learned a great lesson from that wise person, and I did, too, just hearing about it.

Then again, I also remember a familiar adage when I was growing up, which has a bit of a different message. "Walk a mile in my shoes." I had to Google it because I couldn't remember where it came from. Turns out, it was a song sung by Elvis Presley and written by Joe South. "Walk a mile in my shoes. Walk a mile in my shoes. Before you abuse, criticize, and accuse, walk a mile in my shoes."

This is also a good lesson for us, as it encourages us, metaphorically, to walk in another person's shoes. In order to really understand another person – who they

are, how they think and feel, and why they act the way they do – we need to imagine, or even experience, living the life they live.

In fact, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews encouraged his readers to do this. “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” Even though we have seen movies or read books about such experiences, unless you have actually been in that situation, it would be pretty hard to imagine. And nobody wants to walk a mile in those shoes.

For those of us who lead privileged lives (and that’s all of us in this room), we’d rather not know what prison is like; we don’t want to think about being tortured. It’s too unpleasant. It brings us down. We’d rather just be grateful for our good fortune and not have to go down that road at all.

My daughter Shelby and I spent a week together at Heifer Ranch when she was about 13 years old. Heifer Ranch is a working ranch outside of Little Rock, Arkansas, and is a part of Heifer International, which this congregation regularly supports. The ranch is a place for education, where groups can go for a day or a week to learn about hunger and poverty, about how people live in other parts of the

world, and about how Heifer helps people become self-sufficient. We were there for a week with other middle school teens from a church in New Orleans. Each day you spend part of your time learning things like how to make goat cheese or the journey a tomato makes from farm to grocery store. The other part of the day, you work. We fixed a broken barbed wire fence and groomed the horses. And for one night, from about 6 pm to 6 am, you live in the global village.

Shelby and I were assigned to live in urban Zimbabwe, where the houses had dirt floors, and the walls and the roof were made from scrap metal and wood. The doors and windows were just openings in the structure. Others in our group lived in Guatemala, or Appalachia, or Thailand, and some were refugees without any home at all. The point, of course, was to learn about poverty and how people in other parts of the world lived.

Shelby would not hesitate to tell you that this was one of the worst experiences of her life. Not because of the living conditions, necessarily, or even the lack of food. It's just that it was August, in Arkansas, and hotter than Hades. I don't think the temperature fell below 95 degrees that night we spent in Zimbabwe. We didn't sleep, we were drenched with sweat, and she kept begging me, "Please, let's go back to our cabin," which had air conditioning, a real bathroom, and beds.

But I was determined that we were going to follow the rules and learn this important lesson. At one point she said to me, “I can feel sorry for those people without having to live like they do!”

Back to Hebrews: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” *Hospitality to strangers* is an expectation for God’s people that is repeated numerous times throughout the Old and New Testaments. We serve God whenever we welcome a stranger. But here, the writer adds an intriguing and, hopefully, a compelling possibility. Those strangers might actually be angels.

Their shoes might be dirty. In fact, they might be in tatters, barely holding on to calloused, cracked, and bleeding feet that have walked thousands of miles in search of safety and a better life for their children. Their shoes might be too big or too small, holding on to feet that are more desperate than we could ever imagine. Desperate for rest, to be sure. Desperate for welcome and compassion, for comfort and care.

The strangers who are colored differently, who dress differently, who speak a different language, who eat strange foods, or who worship unknown gods. Those strangers might actually be angels.

A few years ago, I was given a children's book called, *The Nativity*. It's the Bible story we all know and love about the birth of Jesus. The illustrations are what make it different and delightful. Especially the angels. Instead of being depicted as pristine and shining, the way we normally imagine them, in the book they appear clumsy and imperfect. Their wings are tattered, and they are all wearing work boots. It makes me chuckle. And it makes me re-think the work of angels.

I read an article recently about a seminary student who was taking a course in Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE as it is commonly known. This is where we learn about pastoral care, visiting people in the hospital and in nursing homes. The student told about her original goal: to bring some word from God to each person she encountered, by reading scripture, or in conversation or prayer. But later, she changed her approach. "Now I arrive seeking the presence of God which is already there and seeking to identify something of God's treasure in that person. Then I sit with them to pray or read scripture together. I don't know how it works

for them, but I know it's become a wonderful blessing for me. I used to worry I was inadequate; now I'm more often in awe." (Jo Bailey Wells, Blogging toward Sunday, August 27, 2007, www.christiancentury.org)

The passage from Hebrews directs us to imagine what it must be like to walk in the shoes of those who suffer – whatever their suffering. And then with empathy and compassion, to be generous in our hospitality. As we work toward this goal, may we imagine filling the shoes of Jesus, going where he would go, serving those he would serve, loving those he would love... to the glory of God!

AMEN.