

“Shoes *Not* Required”

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Psalm 66:16-20 But God definitely listened. He heard the sound of my prayer (v. 19)
- Luke 10:1-11, 16: [Jesus said to them,] “There is a large harvest, but few workers to gather it in. Pray to the owner of the harvest that he will send out workers to gather in his harvest. Go! I am sending you like lambs among wolves. Don’t take a purse or a beggar’s bag or shoes.... Whenever you go into a town and are made welcome, eat what is set before you, heal the sick in that town and say to the people there, ‘The Kingdom of God has come near you.’” (vv. 2-4a, 8-9).
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Our opportunity to witness to the Kingdom of God is right in our everyday setting.

When I was about the age of 5, our family visited my mother’s cousin Gloria, who lived on a farm in Virginia. Gloria and her husband had son about a year older than me. His name was J.H. I don’t know what that stood for. My mother and her cousin Gloria thought it would be a grand idea for my older brother and me to have a picnic with J.H. out in the woods on the other side of the field. So our moms packed each of us a sack with a sandwich and apple and carrots and some Oreo cookies. They sent us off across the barnyard and through the field to a fort J.H. had created out in the woods.

For some reason we boys were all barefoot. J.H. went barefoot pretty much all summer. My brother and I were “city boys” from Chicago, and I don’t know about him, but I rarely went around without shoes. Consequently, I was the proverbial “tenderfoot.” I didn’t much enjoy walking across the crushed limestone that covered most of the barnyard. And when we walked past the dark, weathered gateposts and went into the field, my feet really didn’t enjoy whatever it was we had to walk through. I don’t care if it was alfalfa; it hurt to walk on it. To my tender tootsies it felt like I was walking on broken glass wrapped in barbed wire.

I went maybe ten feet into the field before I stopped, begged my brother and J.H. to come back (which, of course, they didn’t). Then, as they scampered through the field and into the woods, I turned around, walked gingerly across the crushed limestone barnyard, and sat down against the trunk of the big tree that shaded the farmhouse. I ate my Oreos first.

To this day I’m just not much of a barefoot person. My podiatrist actually discourages me from going barefoot—for which I am deeply grateful. Even at home I usually have some sort of shoe or sandal on my feet—my fallen arches are barely acquainted with the tile and wood and carpet of our house.

In Palestine in ancient times, however, shoes were the exception rather than the norm. Shoes were things you wore out of necessity. Perhaps you were a shepherd who might have to spring across rough, rocky ground and run through a briar patch to come

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to the aid of one of your sheep. Shepherds wore shoes or sandals. If you were traveling, you very well might wear something on your feet, because you never knew how rough or smooth the road or path might be. If the weather were extremely hot or cold or rainy, you might be inclined to cover your feet with some sort of protection. Soldiers of ancient times, of course, wore sandals or shoes, or even primitive boots.

But in those ancient days, when you were at home, there was no need for shoes. The floors of homes were usually dirt; perhaps stone or tile. Those were smooth surfaces. The dirt streets of villages and towns were well-worn, precluding the need for foot protection. Apparently even the priests of the Temple in Jerusalem went about their duties barefoot. In most of your everyday activities back then, you were in familiar, safe, comfortable settings. You wouldn't need shoes to protect you against the elements or from the unexpected.

So why was Jesus so adamant when he told those he sent out ahead of him to forget about taking shoes along on their upcoming business trip? In the tenth chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus sends out seventy-two people (it might have been seventy; the Bible's not clear on this). Jesus sends these people out on a mission to the villages and towns Jesus is preparing to pass through. And so these missionaries go.

Why did Jesus send out these seventy-two? It wasn't to sell merchandise for the "Jesus Tour 31 A.D." And it wasn't to poll the people asking, "How likely are you to respond positively to an offer of eternal salvation – would you say you are 'very likely,' 'somewhat likely,' 'not very likely' or 'not at all likely'?" And it certainly wasn't to get them to become members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Earliest-Day Saints... because there was no church yet. So again, why did Jesus send out these seventy-two on this mission?

Jesus told them to heal those who were ailing and say to all the people wherever they happened to be, "*The Kingdom of God has come near you.*" Jesus noted that some people will be receptive and excited when they hear that news. He also acknowledged that that won't always be the case. Jesus said, "*But whenever you go into a town and are not welcomed, go out into the streets and say, 'Even the dust from your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you!'*" (v. 10-11a). It sounds a little spiteful, and maybe it was. Let's face it – we don't think exactly the way the ancients thought, and they didn't always see things the way we do.

But listen to what Jesus added – even after the missionaries are to say that they shake the dust off their feet because they were not welcomed by the town. Even though they have been rejected, still those missionaries are to pronounce to that town, "*But remember that the Kingdom of God has come near you!*" (v. 11b).

Did you hear that? The people who welcome the message of God's love are told that the Kingdom of God has come near them. But the people who reject God's message are told the same thing – the Kingdom of God has come near them, too! Why are we surprised? The grace of God does not depend on a person being open to God's message. God doesn't love us because we do or do not embrace God; God loves us in spite of any and every condition we can possibly create.

Those who embrace the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ help God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven – and they recognize God's will as it unfolds.

Those who reject the good news aren't helping God's Kingdom take root on earth. On the other hand, they aren't going to be able to stop God's will; they'll just miss all the fun and joy as it breaks forth all around them, because they won't have eyes to see and ears to hear. It will be like they're holed up in the basement as a lively, colorful, musical parade approaches – it's all there for them to enjoy, but they can't experience it because they've shut themselves off, closed their eyes and covered their ears.

Now, what about those shoes – the shoes the seventy-two *weren't* supposed to take on their mission? How do they relate to our day? When Jesus gave those seventy-two missionaries their marching orders, he told them not to take any shoes. If you'd wear shoes only when you are not in your everyday, familiar surroundings, I guess Jesus was telling those missionaries to go out to places they were familiar with to bring healing to hurting lives and to pronounce that God's Kingdom is materializing in our world.

Of course, across the centuries, people have gone hither-and-yon to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. But in this particular instance, Jesus said, "Go. Go to your home and tell your spouse that God's Kingdom is at hand. Go to the market and tell your butcher that the kingdom is at hand. Go to the well, and as you draw the day's water for your household, tell the other women at the well how God revealed unconditional love for you in Jesus. As you wash your laundry on the rocks by the stream, and as you thresh and grind the grain for tomorrow's bread, tell those around you how God's will is transforming the world."

It's a wonderful thing for Christians to engage in far-away projects to improve living conditions and preach Jesus Christ. The Presbyterian Church supports such work all over the world and throughout our own country. But equally essential is for every single missionary here – each one of us to whom Jesus said, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all peoples..." – to go to the places most familiar to us and to proclaim, "The Kingdom of God is at hand."

Now, if you walk into Starbucks or Heinen's, stand by the door, and in a loud voice shout, "God's will is unfolding on earth as it is in heaven," well, you won't be wrong, but you will be weird. On the one hand you are correct to share the gospel in the places of your everyday life. That's what Jesus meant by, "Don't take shoes with you." He was saying that we should not forget to proclaim the gospel in our places of comfort and familiarity – the sorts of places where the people of Jesus' day wouldn't have needed to wear shoes: the market, the neighborhood, the workplace, the synagogue, the home.

But there's a time and a place.... I remember riding the El train in Chicago many years ago. As the doors closed and we pulled out of the station, a person standing by the door shouted in a threatening voice, "Are you prepared to die?" My first thought was, "Oh, my gosh, she's got a gun!" But she continued, "Because Jesus died on the Cross to save you and to bring you to Eternal Life." What a relief that she was only a street preacher. But you can see that shouting your testimony while standing in the bread aisle at Marcs is probably not the best strategy.

So how can we be less intimidating and off-putting as we share our conviction that God is at work in the world and in our lives? In casual conversation we can tell a

friend how our church family was supportive when our own family went through a rough patch. We can ask a server at the restaurant if the cross tattoo on his forearm represents a church he is attending in the area. We can ask the mother pushing the stroller with an infant and toddler if she has found a church that welcomes her and her children. We can ask that fellow student to join us at church for meaningful service projects and fun activities and thought-provoking discussions. We can say to that co-worker, "If you're ever interested, I'd be very happy to have you join me and my family at our church some Sunday, and then we could grab a bite afterward."

Our kingdom goal is not to build the membership rolls of this church; if that happens, that's okay. Our kingdom goal is not to enhance the financial operation of this church; if that happens, that's okay. Our kingdom goal is to announce that God's kingdom is at hand. We know this because we are witnesses. We are witnesses to God's will unfolding on earth as it must be in heaven.

And let's wrap this up by remembering how the mission of the Seventy-Two resolved. Luke tells us, "The seventy-two... came back in great joy." Did you ever imagine that proclaiming God's kingdom to your friends would be a joy? A "great joy?" What a blessing, what a joy it is to participate in someone's eyes being opened and ears being unstopped to the good news of God's love! Being a proclaimer for God can bring such joy that I wouldn't even hold it against you if you got up and went out right now to those places of your life that are so familiar and comfortable that you don't need shoes. We may not be able to spare the time or afford the expense to travel overseas to engage in some great Christian mission. But each of us can proclaim Jesus Christ in the comfortable and familiar places in our lives... the familiar places "where God's children don't need shoes."