

The Rector's Sermon on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost

I want to tell you about a pair of shoes I own. I bought these shoes about 15 years ago right when I started seminary. During the first week we had chapel orientation, and we were told we would need black shoes for whenever we had a job in the chapel for services. The only black shoes I owned were an old torn-up pair of Converse, and those would not work; so that weekend my sister and I went to DSW in Union Square on a mission to find just the right pair.

I had a checklist. I needed a pair of black shoes that didn't clip clop or squeak when I walked on stone floors. They had to be comfortable and have no heel because I can't wear heels. They had to be closed-toed and match pants or skirts. And they had to be in a seminarian's budget. *** These are the shoes I left with. I was not thrilled; in fact, I hated them, but they fit all the requirements on my checklist, and I bought them to serve a function. And this was before you could buy shoes from across the world, and they would be at your house in 48 hours. So, these would have to do. For the next four years these would be my church shoes.

I wore these shoes every time I was an acolyte my first year of seminary in our small chapel. I remember wearing them when I felt nervous and insecure and completely overwhelmed. Then that summer I brought with me these shoes--along with another pair of cute dress shoes---when I drove halfway across the country for my hospital internship. On my first day of work I wore my cute shoes, but they were so loud on the tile floors that I didn't touch them again for the rest of the summer. So these were the shoes I wore when I met with nervous patients or grieving families or when I prayed with and for people.

I wore these shoes for the next 2 years when I took the subway 40 minutes uptown for my field experience...from my nervous first day to my last day when I felt like I was moving away from home. I wore these shoes when I sat in front of the commission on ministry and standing committee to see if I would get ordained, and then I wore them when I was ordained a deacon. I wore them when I interviewed for my first job working in a church as a priest. I wore them on my first day there. These shoes were on my feet when I was scared and timid and when I was excited and confident. For 5 years, every time I did any official ministry work, these shoes were on my feet.

In today's reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians we hear about this wonderful and elaborate outfit we should all wear as Christians...the whole armor of God...the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. We are called to be prepared and clothed with what we need for a long and challenging journey.

Paul describes this fantastic outfit but the shoes are nothing special...“as shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” And when I read that, I thought back to these shoes. When I wore these shoes, I never felt cool or that my outfit was fashionable; but I felt prepared, I felt comfortable, I felt ready.

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I will be honest, I never thought anything of these shoes until I first preached on this epistle 9 years ago. I remember thinking “Shoes I need for the journey...it’s talking about my church shoes.” By that point the shoes had been retired and I thought thrown away, but I went digging through my closet and found them buried in the back... sometimes my procrastination comes in handy.

That day I realized there was something special about them; they reminded me of those early days, and I decided that these would be my keepsake, my souvenir, from my years becoming a priest. This time when the readings came up again, I didn’t have to go digging in my closet; I just had to look over on my bookshelf where I keep them in this frame to remind me of this reading. They remind me that I am always wearing the whole armor of Christ; that I am called to be truthful, righteous, and faithful, and to proclaim the word of God to the world. In the Episcopal Church outward signs are important; it is why we wear vestments and why we have elaborate liturgies. But these outward signs are only important if they are pointing to spiritual truths.

These shoes are old and retired and, of course, I can’t just rely on a pair of shoes to be this reminder. We are all called to be clothed in these characteristics everyday, all the time, not just when we are going to church and wearing our “church shoes.” The shoes that make us ready to proclaim the gospel can be anything...our work shoes, or running shoes, high heels or flip flops or maybe if we are lucky, barefoot on a beach somewhere. Every day we are called to proclaim this amazing message to the world no matter what is on the agenda for the day.

When we are preparing for the day ahead, what small part of your day can you use to remind you that you are always clothed with the armor of God? When you put on your bike helmet, remember you are wearing the helmet of salvation. When it comes time to put on our heavy winter coats, let us remember the breastplate of righteousness. When we swing our backpacks or work bags over our shoulder, let us be reminded of the shield of faith. When you wash your hands or even do your dishes, let the water remind you that you are marked by Christ in baptism. When you eat your meal, be reminded that you are filled with the bread of life, the living bread from heaven.

Today is the last Sunday for the Bread of Life Gospels. We have been hearing about the bread of life for the past 5 weeks, but this is one of my favorites. I love that in this one Gospel reading we both acknowledge not only that this teaching is difficult to understand and accept, but also that it is exactly where we are meant to be. After many of Jesus’ followers grumbled, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Jesus asked the disciples if they wished to go away. Simon Peter responds, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

This teaching is hard but it is true. We come here on Sundays because we know we can find truth here at the altar. When we eat the bread of life, we are transformed. When we band together in this community, we are changed and strengthened. We might not always—or even often—know how we are being transformed, but we know it is important and that it is true. Where else would we go?

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But it cannot stop here on Sunday mornings. We have to take what we get at the altar and from this community and bring it out into our lives on Monday and Tuesday and the rest of the week, and the rest of our lives. So tomorrow when you wake up, remember that you are filled with Christ. That what happened today at this altar mattered and that it is still with you. When you walk out the door, you are wearing the armor of Christ and are filled with Christ's love; and someone you might meet will only come to know that love through you...through your words and actions.

Pray also for all of us, so that when we speak, a message may be given to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which we are all ambassadors. Pray that we may declare it boldly, as we must speak.