

5.31.20

[Pastor Barb sits down and takes off her shoes] So, I was 11 years old when the show *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* started. So I was a little old for it. I watched it a bit when I had foster kids. And I've been reading a lot about Fred Rogers lately, and about his life and the work that he did in the world. He was an incredibly positive person who always saw the good and brought out the good in everyone around him--something that we all strive to do, but he did very well. He started every show with the song, "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine, could you be mine?" Then he would take off his shoes and put on a different pair of shoes. Then he would take off his sweater and put on a different sweater. It was quite the act, but it became a comfort to kids all over the country.

I've been thinking a lot about shoes and also about that song. It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood. Because in my neighborhood, it is not a beautiful day. In urban neighborhoods all over this country, it is not a beautiful day. For four days now, every evening, the streets have been lit up with fires, lit up by rioters. And it amazes me that we are still doing this. Still having riots. Still having to react this way to injustices in the world. So these are my preaching tennies [Pastor Barb holds up her tennis shoes]. I always wear these when I preach. You've seen them on me every week for the last 10 1/2 years. Some people like them, some people don't. The only time I don't wear them is Christmas and Easter when I wear a skirt...and then I wear them right up until the time I have to go in public and then I put on some other terrible shoes. So these preaching tennies bring me to you. These preaching tennies call me to try to bring the scripture to life in your life. And this Pentecost Sunday could not have come at a better time.

I'd like to read you a poem by a woman named Mary Lathrop from 1895. Some of it's going to sound familiar. It was originally titled, "Judge Softly".

*Pray, don't find fault with the man that limps,  
Or stumbles along the road.  
Unless you have worn the moccasins he wears,  
Or stumbled beneath the same load.*

*There may be tears in his soles that hurt  
Though hidden away from view.  
The burden he bears placed on your back  
May cause you to stumble and fall, too.*

*Don't sneer at the man who is down today  
Unless you have felt the same blow  
That caused his fall or felt the shame  
That only the fallen know.*

*You may be strong, but still the blows*

*That were his, unknown to you in the same way,  
May cause you to stagger and fall, too.*

*Don't be too harsh with the man that sins.  
Or pelt him with words, or stone, or disdain.  
Unless you are sure you have no sins of your own,  
And it's only wisdom and love that your heart contains.*

*For you know if the tempter's voice  
Should whisper as soft to you,  
As it did to him when he went astray,  
It might cause you to falter, too.*

*Just walk a mile in his moccasins  
Before you abuse, criticize and accuse.  
If just for one hour, you could find a way  
To see through his eyes, instead of your own muse.*

*I believe you'd be surprised to see  
That you've been blind and narrow minded, even unkind.  
There are people on reservations and in the ghettos  
Who have so little hope, and too much worry on their minds.*

*Brother, there but for the grace of God go you and I.  
Just for a moment, slip into his mind and traditions  
And see the world through his spirit and eyes  
Before you cast a stone or falsely judge his conditions.*

*Remember to walk a mile in his moccasins  
And remember the lessons of humanity taught to you by your elders.  
We will be known forever by the tracks we leave  
In other people's lives, our kindnesses and generosity.*

*Take the time to walk a mile in his moccasins.*

Of course, we all know that by "walk a mile in his shoes." But she wrote this at the end of the 19th Century when things were chaotic in this country and all over the world. She was a preacher, by the way, even at the end of the 19th century. But Jesus says something similar in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, where He says, "Judge not that you not be judged. Take the log out of your own eye before you try to take the speck out of somebody else's." As I contemplate what is happening in our country right now, I can't help think that those are words that we need the Holy Spirit to help us to hang on to.

So the disciples probably didn't wear preaching tennies. In fact, I'm thinking, they probably wore sandals. [Pastor Barb holds up a pair of Birkenstock sandals.] And just as Jesus was crucified and laid in the grave, they went to the grave and didn't find Jesus there. Jesus hadn't appeared to them yet. So they're locked away in a room because they were afraid, because times weren't that much different then. And Jesus appears among them for the first time post-resurrection, and the first words out of His mouth are, "Peace be with you. My peace be with you." But then at the end of this text that we heard today from the book of St. John, Jesus says to his disciples, who are in their sandals, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sin of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Now I think often, we hear these words as an invitation to enter into the judge position. To say, "God says I get to choose what is sin and what isn't. God says if I retain your sins, they will be retained for eternity." But instead, we should hear these as words of responsibility. A responsibility to forgive, a call to forgive. These words come through in most of the gospels. But we need to hear them not as an invitation to judge, but as a call to forgive. And if we can do that, if we can live out these words that Jesus gave the disciples as He gave them the Holy Spirit, then "peace be with you" isn't as hard to imagine.

So when I was a kid in Beloit, Wisconsin, I didn't have leather tennies, I had canvas ones. [Pastor Barb holds up a pair of canvas tennis shoes]. I wore them everywhere. This was the 60s. In the 60s, there were riots going on all the time. We lived close enough to Rockford, Illinois, and Chicago that when riots were happening, we could see the smoke. We could see the cities burning in this very tumultuous time. So I got to thinking about riots. You know, we watch these today as if they are happening for the first time. But I went and looked up on Wikipedia, "urban riots". And I just wanted to show you what I found. [Pastor Barb holds up several sheets of printed paper] These are all riots, just in America. Dating back to 1863, I love this one: "Riots carried out by members of the white working class, predominantly protesting against draft laws passed that year in context of the American Civil War, but also against perspective of mixed race neighborhoods."

The next one in 1909, I love. I've got to read this to you. It happened in south Omaha, Nebraska, during a period of economic downturn in the city, a successful community of Greeks in Omaha, Nebraska, was burnt to the ground by a mob from Omaha. This happened after they almost lynched a Greek immigrant accused of having sex with a Protestant woman. A Federal trial brought by the Greek council to the United States ends in stagnation. No person is ever convicted.

In 1919 there are race riots in Chicago because an American teenager who was swimming in Lake Michigan, an African American teenager swimming in Lake Michigan, drifted near a beach that whites considered their own. A white man on break water assailed the black youth with stones, and the black youth drowned. I'm not going to read all of these to you, don't worry. This will be a long sermon, but not that long.

So those are pre-60s. Then we have a whole page of the 60s. A couple in the 70s, one in the 80s, a few in the 90s, a few in the 2000s, and the 2010s. And these are all urban riots, and every single one of them is about race. Now this doesn't even include the anti-war protest riots, it doesn't include the union riots that have happened. These are all riots around race, and they date back to 1863.

I witnessed some of the news coverage of those riots growing up in my relatively small, safe town, but my family never talked about these things. They never mentioned them, because politics was something we just weren't supposed to talk about. Then I think about the days when I wore Birkenstocks... [Pastor Barb holds up the Birkenstock sandals.]...seminary. I did my internship in the inner-city of Milwaukee. And in 1992, after the officers that killed Rodney King were not convicted, we had an escape plan. How we were going to get out of town when the riots started. And the riots did start. We didn't have to escape, we were far enough away. But I watched all of this happen here in my 30s. Seeing that things hadn't changed much since those days in the 60s.

So then we come to this lesson in Acts, the second chapter of Acts. Now understand that the disciples again are locked in a room. Jesus has ascended, and they are afraid. I think we all know locked in a room and afraid right now. I think that is affecting all of us. But we have to remember, we have to dare to say that we are locked in a room, and we are relatively safe unless we choose not to be. But that's not true of the minorities in our country, of African Americans and Hispanic and Latinx people. If you are African American in this country right now, during this COVID virus, you are 3.5 times more likely to die of the coronavirus, and almost twice as likely to die if you are Latinx. That's from a recent study that came out of Yale.

So, this whole week, as I've been listening to the news almost constantly, I went outside the other night in my slippers [Pastor Barb holds up a pair of slippers.], because it sounded like things were getting a little close to my home, which is about two miles, maybe three, from where everything was happening. And I could taste the pepper spray in the air. We were close enough that we could still feel what was happening there. And even in my slippers I realized that things just have not changed in this country yet.

So let's think about those disciples locked in that room, scared of what can happen to them. And then they go out and the Holy Spirit comes upon them. And I love that the Holy Spirit doesn't come gently. The Holy Spirit comes with a violent wind and a tongue of fire. Wind and fire, I've seen a lot of that this week. But understand that of all those nationalities that Tom read to you this morning, most of them spoke either Greek or Arabic, maybe some Hebrew, different dialects. Language wasn't the big issue that separated the diaspora Jews that came together--it was culture and politics. Who was behind the Roman government? What color were they? What country did they come from? This was a sociological thing as much as a language thing. And we talk about this time of Pentecost as kind of the reversal of the Tower of Babel where everyone went off and spoke different languages. But so much more was happening. This was a tumultuous time in Galilee. This was a tumultuous time in Jerusalem. And the disciples, by the

power of the Holy Spirit, stepped out. And here are the words that Peter said to them from the prophecy of Joel, "Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portence in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and smoky mist. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

So some things aren't so different today than they were then. Through history there has been rioting and revolution. And it's happening right here in our country right now. Now I have to tell you, these times are tough, and I am deeply troubled by what's happening. Not only because I've witnessed it, but also because I've had the opportunity to walk with many people who wear the uniform of the police. They are good people wanting to do good work. And I have walked with the poorest of the poor. With African American and Hispanic people who I always have a leg up from, just because of the color of my skin. If I get pulled over for speeding or running a stop sign, not that that would ever happen, I won't sit in my car and fear that I could die in this encounter. They do.

So who is wrong? Who is right? Who is good? And who is bad? The temptation in times like this is to define who is right, who is wrong, who is good, who is bad. The temptation is to say, "Those are bad people, those are good people. The challenge to us is to let the Holy Spirit call us to hear the stories, the histories. To walk, as much as we can, in the shoes of the people who are rioting, of the people who are standing by their side. We can't run to judgement on this. If we do, nothing will continue to change. It hasn't changed in thousands of years. And it's time. But if we take the time to listen to the names and the stories and the history, all of the things that can be known...if we walk with other people, if we let the miracle of the Holy Spirit happen, and listen to each other, that's when things will change.

If you haven't been following the story on the news, you simply must. It's easy to turn off your TV or your computer, and just pretend like none of this is happening. But our country is burning. And it's burning all over the country. Not just in Minneapolis, Lutheran central, where this happened, but all over the country. And you need to listen, not to decide who's good and who's bad, but what is God calling us to.

I am so deeply troubled by what is happening that I am having trouble sleeping at night. But the Holy Spirit gives me the power to listen and look, and look it in the eye and taste the pepper spray, and know that things can change. Because what God calls us to is not the rule of the law; He calls us to justice. And when we depend on the rule of the law to give us justice, it will never happen. Justice happens when we walk with each other, when we talk with each other, when we hear each other's stories. When we care enough to take the time to find out what causes the things that have happened...not just blame those who it's happening to. And let me tell you, the Bible has a ton to say about justice. It shows up from the beginning to the end. Let justice roll down. Justice is what we are looking for. And in order to find justice, we must all, me included,

look at ourselves honestly. We must see what privilege we have; we must see what privilege we are taking away from others and listen to God's call for justice.

So, in the end, I come here before you barefooted...well, almost bare, I've got socks on...barefooted and humbled by what is happening. But I come to you at the altar of Jesus Christ who went to the cross, was crucified, and cried out, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." And things will change when we each dare to cry out, "Forgive us. Forgive us for not listening. For not changing the world that we live in."

You know the song says, "There are no good guys, there are no bad guys, there's only you and me. And sometimes we disagree." And if we go looking for easy answers and people to blame for this, nothing will change. But there is room. By the power of this Holy Spirit that created that miracle on Pentecost where everyone heard about the grace of God in their own language. There's room for redemption, but only through repentance. If we turn around and declare by the power of that Holy Spirit that we will stand for justice. And we will say, "Please God, don't let us return to normal." I hear it all the time, "I can't wait for things to get back to normal." We cannot return to normal. Not after this COVID virus. Not after what's happening in the streets of our country today. Normal is not what we need to go back to. We need to go ahead to a nation that is committed to justice for all. That is committed to equality. Not just words written on a statue, but words that we all try to live out. Because that's what we are called to by scripture. That's what we are called to by Jesus--to walk with those who are on the outside.

So what it comes down to is, my friends, you really can't walk in my shoes. They won't fit you; they are shaped to my foot because I wear them all the time. But you can walk beside me. You can hear my story, and I can hear yours. If we walk with each other and we listen to each other, we will change the world. And mostly if we love each other the way God loved us. That is grace. That is what we gather around. This is not a political sermon. This is about the grace of God and how it can change the world as we see it out there now. And if we dare to do that together, to hear each other, listen to each other, to listen to the Holy Spirit and ask what it is we are to do, then the words that Jesus says to those disciples will be easier to hear. And the words we need to hear most of all right now: "Peace be with you. My peace I leave with you."

Amen