



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“WHEN THE SHOES DON’T FIT”

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 22:1-19; Luke 4:1-13

This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, September 22, 2019 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.”’

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’

Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We’ve probably all heard some variation of that empathetic phrase which speaks to “walking a mile in someone’s shoes.” In Harper Lee’s classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch put it like this: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb in his skin and walk around in it.

I was privy to a brief conversation between two people - a younger adult and an older adult, and this younger person clearly held their elder in high esteem. As they finished talking, and as the older adult was walking away, the younger person turned to me and said something to the effect: “I hope to be like her one day. She’s got it all together.”

Knowing that older woman as I did, and knowing something of her circumstances, I thought to myself – “Really?” Do you really want your spouse to be struggling with Alzheimer’s disease? Do you want your children to never call you? Do you want to feel tired every single morning and wonder how you are going to make it through the day?

It is very difficult to know what is going on in the life of someone else...and yet we try. Often, with the very best of intentions, we attempt to understand our neighbors and what they might be going through, we want to put ourselves in their shoes by taking into account those lesser known details of a person’s life so that we might begin to understand why they act the way they act or talk the way they talk or feel the way they feel. But here’s the thing...at the end of the day, sometimes those shoes, they just don’t fit. For example, I don’t know what it is like to lose a child, and I pray I never do. I don’t know what it is like to go through cancer treatments or to not be able to walk freely from one place to another, and this is not to suggest that we cannot have empathy for someone else! It doesn’t mean that there aren’t any number of wonderful opportunities to relate to people and to understand something of their experiences, to love and serve them with authenticity. We can do that! All I am saying is this: someone else’s shoes are simply someone else’s shoes.

Could I ever claim to know what it is like to walk in the footsteps of a victim of the Holocaust just because I read the book: *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era*? Can I fully understand the particular life experience that has led to the development of black or liberation theology just because I have read some of James Cone’s works or sat in on a lecture led by Justo Gonzalez? Do I have any real sense of what it is like for some of our neighbors right here in Charleston who struggle with public transportation and getting to and from work in a timely fashion just because one of their cars was in the shop last week? Surely I wouldn’t claim to truly understand at a deep and personal level what it means to be among the working poor and to be nicked and dined to death just because I find it difficult to save enough money to buy a golf cart?

Oh, I suspect that, from time to time, we have even tried to put ourselves in the shoes of some of our favorite Biblical characters. Consider this morning’s Old Testament Lesson from Genesis 22. I once heard a pastor talk about how they could relate to Abraham because they too had been called upon to trust God and to make some significant sacrifice in their life. But can any of us really fathom what it must have been like for Abraham to have been asked to take the life of his own son. Oh, with all of the faithful exegesis we can muster, the chasm that exists between Abraham’s experience and our own, it might as well be the Grand Canyon!

And I’ve fallen into this trap myself. When I was a sophomore in high school, I played soccer – and this was during an era when shin guards were optional, mind you. During one game, a player from Hilton Head Prep missed the ball and kicked my shin by mistake, and it broke my tibia and fibula. My mom - who, incidentally, ran out onto the soccer field...in front of everyone - she drove me straightway to Dr. Joe Thompson’s office and he put me in a cast.

Some months later, after having finished my rehabilitation and some weeks into the next football season, I was put into a game for the first time! I don’t recall the first play – I think I may have been called upon to block; but the second play I remember very well. I was a wide-

receiver and the play called for me to run five yards and then turn to the sideline. As it happened, our quarterback made a great throw and a fellow wide-receiver made a great block...and I was able to scamper down the sideline for a touchdown.

The crowd went crazy...my mom and dad were beside themselves - the video my mom took was hardly any good at all because she was jumping up and down...it was a great time of celebration! I used that story a few years later, and as a newly ordained pastor, to relate, at least as I thought I could, to what must have been overwhelming celebration and exuberance around Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. But can any of us really relate to that? I mean, can any of us wear those shoes, the shoes of our Savior?

After reading this morning's New Testament Lesson, would any of us dare say that we can somehow relate to what Jesus must have been going through when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness...just because there may have been a time in our own life when we were struggling whether to make the right decision and we stood our ground, and we held firm in our convictions? Or when some of us go about the occasional discipline of fasting, are we then able to say that we understand what it must have been like for Jesus to go without food for five plus weeks?

In our meager expressions of fasting, can we possibly comprehend Jesus' hunger, his spiritual anguish...can we really walk in those shoes? Those sandals, about which John the Baptizer said: "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals?" to say nothing of wearing them. No, we can't; but here is the miracle! While we may never be able to wear the shoes of Jesus, He has proven himself more than willing and able to wear ours.

Consider how it was that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, full of grace and truth; how it is that, in accordance with Hebrews 4:15, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin," this is to say that Jesus has tasted the entirety of the human experience and rose above it. What's more, this great high priest of ours, he continues to rule today, and he continues to draw near to us today!

Friends, no one knows us better; no one offers greater comfort and consolation; indeed, no one loves us more than the one who knows exactly what it is like to walk in our shoes – and praise be to God that the very Word of God incarnate continues to dwell among us this day by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. Ah, in this way, has God not given us a wonderful example for how we can relate to one another, how we, each of us, can attain a higher level of empathy? We don't have to wear someone else's shoes, but we do have to walk with them!

One of my favorite movie scenes of all time comes from the movie *Good Will Hunting*. The character, Will Hunting - he is sitting with his psychiatrist on a park bench. Now, in a previous encounter, Will had seen a painting on the doctor's wall and had proceeded to dissect the doctor's life, presuming to know everything about him.

When they were sitting on the bench, it was the doctor's turn to shed some light on the situation. "You have never been out of Boston, have you?" the doctor said. "If I asked you

about art, you'd probably give me the skinny on every art book written. Michelangelo, you know a lot about him. But I bet you can't tell me what it smells like in the Sistine chapel. You've never actually stood there and looked up at that beautiful ceiling.

If I asked you about love, you'd probably quote me a sonnet, but you've never looked at a woman and been totally vulnerable...known someone who could level you with her eyes...feeling like God put an angel on earth just for you...could rescue you from the depths of hell. And you wouldn't know what it is like to be her angel...to have that love for her to be there forever...through anything...through cancer.

And you wouldn't know about sitting up in a hospital room for two months holding her hand because the doctors understood that the term "visiting hours" didn't apply to you. But you presumed to know everything about me because you saw a painting of mine and you ripped my life apart."

"You're an orphan, right?" the doctor said. "Do you think I'd know the first things about how hard your life has been, and who you are, because I read *Oliver Twist*?" Does that encapsulate you?

In that particular scene, the doctor was essentially sharing what we already know – that we can never truly understand what it is like to be someone else; that there are in fact limits to how we can relate to one another. But I'd be remiss if I didn't tell you that the doctor went on to express his earnest desire to know Will Hunting personally. "I'm fascinated," the doctor said, "I'm in."

At a very basic level, is that not what God expects of us? God Almighty, who never asks us to do anything that he isn't willing to do himself, the one who created us and loved us, and who lived and died and rose again so that we might know how to live and how to love. He calls us to follow him, for sure, but he also invites us to participate in a journey of faith – and that journey was never intended to be taken alone, but rather taken together – it is a walk that we take as the body of Christ, together, and for Christ's sake! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*