

“These Shoes Were Made for Peacemaking”

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Based upon Isaiah 52:7-10; Ephesians 6:10-20

How many pairs of shoes do you own? I don't mean how many do you actually wear, which is usually a much smaller number for most people, but how many do you own? Although websites differ a little in their numbers, the consensus seems to be that in America, the average woman owns between 19 and 30 pairs of shoes, and the average man, between 5 and 12.¹ That sounds like a lot of shoes, until you consider how specialized footwear has become. Men and women both typically have sneakers for walking or running, (or both, since clever marketers have convinced us that different sneakers are needed for different forms of exercise.) We have dress shoes for work and maybe church, sandals for summer fun at the pool or beach, and usually a pair of snow boots for winter. But those are the bare minimum. Women are expected to have shoes that are fashionable, not just functional. So that means having multiple pairs of dress shoes in colors to match your outfits, heels and flats, dress boots, as well as snow boots. Depending upon your entertainment preferences, you may also have dancing, golfing, boating, or bowling shoes, soccer cleats, or ice skates. You may have fuzzy slippers for winter and water shoes for summer. Depending on your job, you may also have work boots, military boots, crocs, or organ shoes, and those of us who have been bridesmaids, usually have in the back of our closets at least one pair of shoes dyed to match a dress that we will never wear again in public. You can see how the numbers can pile up quickly.

I've been thinking about shoes all this week, not because I'm one of those women who is obsessed with shoes, (I'm really not), but because of the footwear metaphor the author of *Ephesians* used in his description of the “armor of God.” He said we should prepare to fight the forces of darkness in our world by putting on whatever shoes we have that make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. If we took that literally, what do you think those shoes would look like? You can buy Psalm sneakers online. [Slide shown.]² But so far, I haven't found any shoes specifically marketed for improving human peacemaking and witnessing skills.

Yet when you think about it in a less literal way, our shoes do witness for us in so many other ways. They proclaim whether we value comfort or fashion more, have a lot of money or a little, are trend-setters, followers, or resisters, and work or play for a living. In Western culture, which is so sedentary, shoes are not so much about protecting our feet, as they are about making a statement. But what the statement is depends upon who you ask. Do you remember the famous flip flop controversy during George W. Bush's presidency?³ (Oh, for the days when the

¹ See e.g. “You Probably Own Way Too Many Pairs of Shoes, Study Says” HUFFPOST, Aug. 19, 2013, retrieved Aug. 21, 2019 from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/19/too-many-shoes_n_3779196.html; Blake, Meredith, “How Many Shoes Are Too Many Shoes?” NY DAILY NEWS, Feb. 29, 2008, retrieved Aug. 20, 2018 from www.nydailynews.com/life-style/shoes-shoes-article-1.286381.

² See <https://herzoge.com/products/psalm-119-105-shoes-with-bible-verses-on-them>.

³ “White House Footwear Fans Flip-Flop Kerfuffle: Sports team's fashion choice stirs debate on fashion, politics,” US NEWS on NBCNEWS.com, Associated Press 7/22/2005 9:42:39 PM ET, retrieved Aug. 21, 2018 from http://www.nbcnews.com/id/8670164/ns/us_news/t/white-house-footwear-fans-flip-flop-kerfuffle/#.W4_2T1VKj3g

controversies were just about footwear!). The Northwestern University women's lacrosse team showed up at the White House for a ceremony honoring the team for its NCAA championship. They came dressed in lovely, appropriate dresses, but matched those dresses with flip flops. "Shocking!" the press reported. "They are disrespecting the office of the presidency," people cried. The athletes, who were Millennials, which typically wear flip flops more than any other kind of shoe, did not understand all the fuss. "I spent \$16 to get fancy flip flops with rhinestones on them," one girl explained. Others felt the footwear was appropriate to convey that they were athletes not shoe models. They knew enough not to pair their dresses with cleats after all. Flip flops were the only other kind of shoes they ever wore.⁴

In the Bible, the symbolism of feet and footwear is equally complicated, especially in the Old Testament. On the one hand, shoes are consistently associated with the profane. So when Moses, and later Joshua encountered God, the first thing God said was "Take off your shoes, you're on holy ground!" (Exod. 3:5; Josh. 5:15.) It was better for them to stand with naked feet before God than to desecrate the ground with the filth of the world on their shoes. For the same reason, the Levites were required to take off their shoes while carrying the vessels of the Tabernacle, and the priests went barefoot when performing rituals in the sanctuary.⁵ Imagine if I led worship barefoot! That might raise a few eyebrows! Yet on the other hand, when the company that was being kept was human and not divine, the Jews believed that it was improper to be seen barefoot. Thus, the Talmud advises, "A person should sell the roof beams of his house to buy shoes for his feet;"⁶ in other words, "Do whatever you can to get some shoes on to cover up those naked feet!" To be seen barefoot was to proclaim either that you were a low-class sinner, or that you were really poor, or both.

In contrast, to wear sandals, which were the main type of shoe in biblical times, was to be a decent and appropriately-attired member of society. Rich people wore beautiful sandals; poor people wore plain ones. But all kinds of sandals were used symbolically to communicate everything from power and love, to condemnation and obeisance. To make a land purchase legal, a seller would take off one of his shoes and hand it to the buyer. Marital contracts were made and ended with shoes as well. When a man married his widowed sister-in-law according to the laws of Levirate marriage, she would often untie the laces of one of his sandals to show she was becoming subject to him. (Undoing the shoe of another was a sign of humility and servanthood. So, when John the Baptist said that he was not fit to untie the thong of Jesus' sandal, he was saying that he felt he wasn't even good enough to be Jesus' servant.) But going back to Levirate marriage again, if the brother-in-law refused to marry his brother's widow as duty called, she would take his whole right sandal off, throw it on the ground in front of the elders in the community, and spit on it to show that her brother-in-law had lost his right to her hand and her property. (See Ruth 3:4). In other contexts, people showed disgust by taking off their own shoes

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Nacht, Jacob, "The Symbolism of the Shoe with Special Reference to Jewish Sources," THE JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW, New Series, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, Jul. 1915), p. 1, accessed Aug. 20, 2018 from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1451461>.

⁶ Talmud (Shabbat 129a), as cited by Rozovsky, Lorne, "Jews and Shoes," Chabad.org., retrieved Aug. 22, 2018 from https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/407510/jewish/Jews-and-shoes

and throwing them at others,⁷ as a reporter did once at George W. Bush. (What was it with him and shoe scandals?)

There are rules in Jewish commentaries about how many pairs of shoes men and women are allowed to own, rules forbidding wearing shoes made of leather during the seven days of mourning, and rules requiring mourners to put a pebble in their shoes to remind them of the mourning period.⁸ There are stories about men falling for women wearing sexy sandals in the *Song of Solomon* (Song 7:2), and the apocryphal *Book of Judith*, (Judith 10:4), and prophecies in *Amos* about God being furious at the rich for “selling out the poor for a pair of silver sandals.” (Amos 2:6). Back then, since sandals were cheap, Amos was trying to convey that it took very little for the rich to sell out the poor. But now that a pair of high-heeled Manolo Blahnik sandals, which were popularized by the character Carrie Bradshaw on the T.V. show *Sex in the City*, cost about \$950 dollars, that prophecy has taken on a whole new meaning. Now our wealthy are spending insane amounts of money for something as trivial as silver sandals, instead of on human beings in need, which, I think is at least as bad, if not worse.

The author of *Ephesians* was not referring to any of these laws when he presented an image of the appropriate attire of a well-defended Christian, however. The armor described in today’s lesson is based upon a reworking of the armor that was typically worn by Roman soldiers. They wore metal helmets and breast plates, carried swords and shields covered with wet leather to protect them from their enemy’s flaming arrows. On their feet, they wore a special kind of hybrid sandal/boot called a *caliga*. The back was like a boot, but the front was open like a sandal to minimize blisters and allow soldier’s feet to breathe. **[Slide of caliga shown.]**⁹ On the bottom of their *caligae* they had hobnails, short nails hammered into the soles like cleats, to give them traction in the mud, and to serve as weapons when soldiers came upon an enemy on the ground. **[Slide of hobnails shown.]** One good stomp of their foot, and the enemy was no more.

The fact that Paul replaced these shoes designed to enable someone to hold their ground no matter what, and to kill whoever got in his way, with shoes which convey the peace and love of the Gospel is quite telling. That image, combined with the rest of the defensive armor he described, makes it clear that the Gospel does not call Christians to offensive warfare, but to something else. When it comes to defeating evil in the world, Christians are called to convey the good news of God’s love for all people, and to be peacemakers, not war mongers. Our spiritual shoes are made to reconcile, not to crush.

It would be amazing if there were actual shoes that could magically empower people to behave in this way, almost like Cinderella’s glass slippers helped her to behave like a princess. But there are no such shoes, and finding actual shoes isn’t Paul’s point anyway. His point was that if we want to be faithful to Christ, we need to choose to live as if we are already wearing

⁷ *Ibid*, Nacht, Jacob, “*Symbolism of Shoes...*”, 4-5.

⁸ *Ibid*; see also *ibid* “*Jews and Shoes*”; “*All About Shoes: Sandals: A Biblical Profile*,” Blog posted Nov. 4, 2010, retrieved Aug. 20, 2018 from <http://allaboutshoes-toeslayer.blogspot.com/2010/11/sandals-biblical-profile.html>

⁹ Both images of the caligae are available at Norton, Shawn, “*Caligae- Footwear of Rome’s Fighting Men*,” ROME ACROSS EUROPE, Aug. 18, 2015, accessed Aug. 23, 2018 from <http://www.romeacrosseurope.com/?p=2534#sthash.7CUOPrP.dpbs>.

such shoes. We need to take the hobnails out of our souls that make us inflexible and hurtful in our interactions with others, and focus our attention and our efforts on compromise and compassion. In the same way that a basketball player can't be great wearing toe shoes, or a tap dancer can't be great wearing bunny slippers, we cannot be great disciples if we go through this life with a warrior's attitude. Christ has called us to make peacemaking and reconciliation our job, and sharing God's love, our cause.

Next Sunday on the Presbyterian calendar it reads, "the Season of Peace begins." That idea sounds as unrealistic as magic shoes, given how divided and conflict-ridden our world is. But the notation is not wishful thinking. It is simply a liturgical reminder that we in the Church are supposed to spend a great deal of our time thinking about peace and how best to achieve it. The General Assembly of our denomination approved as recently as 2016, a detailed, five-point statement which affirms that Christ calls us to contemplate our God-giving calling to reconciliation, renounce violence, judgmentalism, and hate, and acknowledge our complicity in allowing them.¹⁰ We are supposed to think about what it means that we are called, if not to step in Christ's shoes, then at least to follow in his footsteps.

In an age when people kill others for their sneakers and judge others just because their heels are too high, or their soles are too thick, the idea of being peacemakers may seem like an impossible task. If we can't even be nice about something as superficial as the shoes that people choose to wear, then how can we ever hope to bring Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, socially conservative and socially liberal people of every race, gender, and nation together in peace? I don't have any easy answers. But as we ponder peacemaking in the weeks ahead, I think we can learn from two shoe stories a couple of mental exercises that we can do to help us begin to take the hobnails out of our hearts.

The first lesson comes from the classical music world.¹¹ Until recently, sexism in the classical music world was so great that it was almost impossible for women to be hired by professional orchestras. When women began to protest the discrimination, orchestra managers tried to solve the problem by having musicians audition behind a curtain. But the bias of those hiring was so great that when they heard a musician walking across the stage in what sounded like heels, they still wouldn't hire her no matter how well she played. Some women tried to solve this problem by putting on men's shoes and stomping across the stage. It worked, but it still wasn't fair. Eventually, the management decided that instead of putting women in the position of having to wear men's shoes to get a job, the management would make everyone audition barefoot. As soon as they did that, the hiring folks heard only the music and there was a 50% increase in women's hiring.

¹⁰ The full statement, "Risking Peace In A Violent World: Five New Peacemaking Affirmations," and an explanation of the five affirmations is available at <https://www.pcusa.org/.../risking-peace-in-a-violent-world-five-new-pe-78812>.

¹¹ See e.g. Rice, Curt, "How Blind Auditions Help Orchestras to Eliminate Gender Bias," THE GUARDIAN, Oct. 14, 2013, retrieved Aug. 23, 2018 from <https://www.theguardian.com/women-in-.../blind-auditions-orchestras-gender-bias>; Goldin, Claudia and Rouse Cecilia, "Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of "Blind" Auditions on Female Musicians," HARVARD Kennedy School Women and Public Policy Program, 2000, retrieved from <http://gap.hks.harvard.edu/orchestrating-impartiality-impact-%E2%80%9Cblind%E2%80%9D-auditions-female-musicians>

We will not be able to be true peacemakers until we stop expecting everyone to wear the political, social, and spiritual shoes we like best, and start appreciating their God-given gifts instead. To do that, we all need to go barefoot, figuratively speaking. It makes no difference to God if your shoes cost \$1,000 or \$16, have diamonds or holes on their soles. When it comes to our relationship with God, we all are barefoot sinners. Yet we are all also beloved to God, notwithstanding being sinners. So the next time you find yourself enraged by someone, mentally kick off their shoes and your own in your mind, and think about how God loves everyone, stinky feet and souls and all. Try to hear and see the gifts in the other. Our crushing and judging each other will not bring any of us closer to God. Moving beyond our biases will.

The second shoe lesson comes from ancient Judaism.¹² One of the footwear laws in the Talmud required Jews to follow a specific ritual when putting on their sandals. They were supposed to say a prayer of gratitude to God, then put on the right sandal first, but not tie it. Then they were to put on and tie the left sandal. Last, they were to return to the right sandal and tie it. The reverse was done when taking them off. The reason for the law has to do with cultural right-side favoritism and the fact that Orthodox Jews wore a teffilim, the little box holding scripture on their left arm. But the basic idea behind the law was to sanctify even something as silly or profane as shoes, to remind us to walk always in covenant faithfulness.

We can do a similar thing without wearing sandals or a teffilim. Each day when you grab the pair of shoes that you like best, you can turn them into peacemaking shoes by putting them on thoughtfully with prayer. “Oh God, may these shoes give me the patience, the wisdom, and the compassion I need to witness faithfully to your gospel of Love.” Or, if you have had a big fight with a loved one during the day, take a minute and change your shoes, like Mister Rogers did at the beginning of every show. Think of yourself as changing out of your caliga, and into your peace shoes. The break will give you time to calm down, and the change will remind you whose shoes you are called to wear.

In their hit song “Girl Shoes,” a wonderful folk trio called the Chenille Sisters, describe what a social rite of passage it is for girls to put on pointy-toes, high heeled girl shoes for the first time.¹³ The song tells the story of how a woman who always wore sensible shoes was changed forever the day a friend persuaded her to put on a pair of “pointy-toed, girl shoes.” She knew they were terrible for her feet, but they made her feel fantastic nonetheless. “I felt just like I was Sophia Loren,” she says. “I felt a sudden little swing in my hips.”¹⁴ It’s a funny song which speaks to the power footwear has to change how we see ourselves and others. By the grace of God, may we be so changed by the love of Christ, that whenever we put on our work boots, dress shoes, golf shoes, and flip flops every morning, we feel ourselves empowered for peacemaking, and ready for reconciliation, and may the strut in our steps witness to the whole world the transforming power of God’s love. Amen.

¹² “*All About Shoes*,” citing Shulchan Aruch/Orach Chaim 2:4 and 2.5.

¹³ You can listen to the song at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyT09nlRJ0M>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*