

# How to have beautiful feet

## Isaiah 52:6-10 (NRSV)

[7] How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." [8] Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Holy One to Zion. [9] Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for God has comforted this people,

Romans 10:5-21 selections "the message"

Moses wrote that anyone who insists on using the law code to live rightly before God soon discovers it's not so easy – every detail of life regulated by fine print!

But trusting God to shape the right living in us is a different story – no precarious climb up to heaven to recruit the Messiah, no dangerous descent into hell to rescue the Messiah. So what exactly was Moses saying?

*The word that saves is right here, as near as the tongue in your mouth, as close as the heart in your chest.*

It is the word of faith that welcomes God to go to work and set things right for us. This is the core of our preaching. Say the welcoming word to God, ... with your whole being embrace God, and then say it right out loud: "God has set everything right."...

Isaiah asked what we all ask at one time or another; "does anyone care, God?" Is anyone listening and believing a word of it? ..But unless the Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to.

Moses had it right when he predicted:

"When you see God reach out to those you consider inferiors – outsiders – you'll become insanely jealous. When you see God reach out to people you think are religiously stupid, you'll throw temper tantrums.

Isaiah dared to speak out these words of God. People found and welcomed me who never so much as looked for me. And I found and welcomed people who had never even asked about me.

Last year I took my 84 year old mother for her first ever pedicure. It helped that she was somewhat confused and didn't really "get it" until we asked her to sit in the beauticians chair and take off her socks. She refused. She had never done anything so intimate outside of her bedroom. Finally after much cajoling, she agreed to let them do to her, in a private room, whatever it was they were doing to Miriam sitting in the chair beside her. And while she tolerated it, there was not much joy in having her feet beautified.

"Beautiful feet" is not a common metaphor and certainly not beauty associated with anyone talking about religion. More common is the mad prophet with a sign announcing doom, or the relative who brings fundamentalist zealotry to the thanksgiving table.

G. Ernest Wright, saint of this congregation and revered Harvard Hebrew Scholar, was noted for saying the Bible should be called not the "Word", but the "acts" of God. For, as our lesson says, God is continually going to work to put things right, reaching out and seeking. In fact, buried deep in the core of the ancient doctrine of the Trinity is the truth that it is in the very nature of God to go out – as the creed says." I believe in the spirit who proceeds from the father and the son."

And believe it or not, you and I are made in God's image, with the same "going out" nature. God invites us to participate in the divine plan to save and redeem humanity (Rom. 16:25-27). Thus, whenever we engage in mission, we participate in "*missio dei*" – God's mission in the world. God has been calling out from the world a chosen people, and sending that people back into the world to be servants and witnesses of the divine reign.

Yet the idea that **we** might be the one who brings the gospel to another takes more cajoling than did my mother.

- ❖ It's not just our natural reticence at discussing intimate matters in public.
- ❖ It's not just our intellectual discomfort because spiritual life requires more than mastering concepts and cogent arguments.
- ❖ Nor it is that we willingly cede the Christian apologetic to the bigots and the ignorant.
- ❖ In large part it is because we are so very much aware of a time when

- ❖ the gospel was clothed in our own cultural values and
- ❖ the good news was confined within our own political or economic framework;
- ❖ It is because we have judged our forbears quite harshly for their sins, and now find ourselves uneasy at celebrating their accomplishments. We are very skittish about bearing the gospel anywhere.

Yes, we are hard to convince. We read this morning: “unless the word is preached, there is nothing to listen to”. And we know Jesus great commission found in Matthew (28:19-20 NRSV) “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” But we don’t really accept the task as ours even though the Bible tells us so.

Though we have deep feelings about the importance of this church here in this community, the institution’s need for continuity is just not very compelling. We need better reasons, more compelling motivation, a more persuasive rationale to bring the “good news” anywhere.

And then there is the issue about what we would say. What would you say in a sentence or so, about what is “good” about the “good news”?

So this is a big subject. and I found myself trying to write several sermons and deliver them all this morning. You will be grateful that I discovered this.

Our lessons for this first Sunday in Advent, clearly talk about God going to the outsider with the message of peace. So we will talk first today about how we might approach the differing belief or lack of belief in another with the truth of our experience.

If it we find that it is possible to talk to another about our relationship with God without creating cognitive dissonance about our relationship with the other, then we might be willing to look at what we would say.

There are at least three things that I think we, in Hancock Church, can agree upon up front.

1. Pluralism has become a challenge for the western Christian church.
  - ★ The assumption our society is basically Christian is no longer true. But Christians in the rest of the world have always lived in a pluralistic society and thrived.
2. Monotheism does not demand one conformist theology.

3. Christians always have differed, and probably always will, on how much absolute truth Christianity possesses, and how much truth is present in other faiths.
  - ★ And as Congregationalists, we take special pride in our non-conformity.
  - ★ Isaiah tells us that God, “found and welcomed people who had never even asked about me.”

Now that I am getting older, my eyes need four different prescription lens strengths for me to get along in the world. My trifocals cover far, near and computer and when I read, I take off my glasses for a good close look.

I suggest that there are at least four modern Theologies of Christian experience that show positive regard for other faith communities but also call us to be the messenger with beautiful feet bringing the gospel.

We often forget that theology is an academic discipline, like physics. It explores the universe of beliefs. And as new discoveries challenge the old paradigms, as new models emerge, there is tension and conflict. So these theological models, or lenses are works in progress, they contain paradox and challenge some cherished assumptions. But today you can compare them to your experience, and try them on for size.

### 1. The Hidden Christ and the Anonymous Christian

It is an ancient Christian tradition, re-articulated by modern theologians like Hans Kung, that wherever men and women respond to Christ’s Spirit, even though they do not know it or call it by that name, Christ is present.

- ★ We believe that conscious choice to be Christ’s disciple is God’s desire for everyone; but there is more than one way for the Spirit to bring people into the reality of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection; and Judgment belongs to God alone.
- ★ Some would have a problem with the patronizing tone of this theology, “how would I feel if I were told I was really an “anonymous Muslim?”

## 2. **The second lens is the Inclusive Cosmic Christ and the Universal Word or “logos”**

Christ is not only the historical Jesus, but the Eternal and Omnipresent Word; as Paul writes to the Colossians, Jesus' life is "the ikon of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). The teacher, lover, healer, prophet, witness, and martyr Jesus is the decisively particular instance of what God is doing always and everywhere as the Second Person of the Trinity. Thus we recognize any truth found in other religions as THE WORD.

- ❖ In nature, Wisdom is the creative intelligence, whether described through creation myth or science.
- ❖ In human nature, It is the "Law written on the heart", and "as close as the heart in your chest"- that inner sense of right and wrong.
- ❖ In community, it is the power of God repairing the damage of sin through all available means.

We believe God's grace is at work everywhere and is called by different names by various people

Some find in this an questionable undervaluing of both

- ❖ the human nature of Jesus and
- ❖ Participation in the visible Company of Jesus the Servant, i.e. the church.

## 3. **The third lens is that of the Community's Story**

"Story" is not necessarily "ultimate truth" but rather the central act of any community and consists of many stories, both historical and symbolic; images, affirmations, and values; rituals, ceremonies, and customs -- all of which embody and evoke the soul or Spirit at work in any human community.

There are two emerging, divergent, but overlapping schools of thought about the Community's story.

### ❖ **“Narrative Theology” emphasizes Fidelity to Our Community's story in a Pluralistic World.**

The stories our community has been given to tell about God's grace at work in the world have truth in them, for we see their power to invite transformation and blessing. While we do not deny that there may be truth at work in other

stories, we are called to be faithful to the Story given to us. For most of us, our Story embodied in Christian song and Scripture and sacrament continues to guide and comfort us throughout life, expressing deeply felt values and defining our community identity.

- ❖ We believe that we cannot make ourselves more accessible to interaction with other world religions by separating ourselves from these long-held beliefs. We can tell our Story, and invite others to enter its power, and work with them as fellow citizens without making ultimate judgments against truths in other's stories.

### ❖ **The second approach uses Our Community's Story to Name the Sacred in our Midst.**

Humans make stories to describe the experience of the Holy here and now. It is how the Community keeps abreast of the Living Mystery of the Spirit.

- ❖ Christian stories, traditions and rituals are metaphors in which individuals find meaning and a common language to speak of God at work within and around persons in the community. We are, each of us, invited to discover and claim our own spiritual story, and to look into the Christian family story -- and at other sacred stories -- for ways in which our personal spiritual journey can be confirmed, challenged and enriched.
- ❖ The challenge of both “Story” theologies for some, is that living truth is not an abstraction. It comes to specific people in particular situations as we seek to explain "what we have seen and heard." Our community identity cannot be boiled down to some abstract "kernel" of objective, universal, disembodied truth. While a Buddhist believes in “compassion” and a Christian “agape”. There is a difference. And there is, somewhere, a limit to how much we can integrate stories from outside Christianity into our Christian Story, and still have “our story”.

## 4. **The Fourth lens is Theocentric.**

There is an episode of Babylon 5, where a Roman Catholic monk on this future, multi-planetary space station is in dialogue with people from other planetary cultures. His order's mission is to "explore the many faces and names of God" on all the known worlds. With great respect, he inquires of a new species: "How has the Mystery been known among you?" When asked, by those he approaches, to share the "defining moment of encounter with the Sacred", he speaks movingly

about Jesus' temptation to run away from the task of redemption in the Garden of Gethsemane. Both parties conclude the conversation with heads bowed in the presence of the Mystery.

The Theocentric approach to our relation with other faiths has been called "a Copernican Revolution" in theology. Christians take our place as one among many planets of belief, entering into a journey of mutual learning circling The Divine Mystery, Itself the Sun around which all the religions revolve.

In each faith, men and women demonstrate lives of integrity, demonstrating what Christians know as the "fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22). Each faith is capable of fostering extraordinary saints who manifest holiness of life and, quite often, the same healing and prophetic powers that we find in the saints of the Bible and Christian history. While each faith is unique and distinctive, there are identifiably common elements, many of which are already deemed honorable by Christians. Any believer who asserts claims of superiority or uniqueness is simply ignorant.

Theocentrism takes two forms:

1. **Universalism** emphasizes the similarities between religions, distilling the "common essence" of all the religions. It is the other "U" in the Unitarian churches.
2. **Particularism** emphasizes the richness of religious difference, expressed in real life. All religions may be flowers, but a rose is not a daffodil.

We believe:

- ❖ Each religion needs its distinctive culture to be real for those who follow it.
- ❖ Every religion expresses human nature and the Sacred in a unique way.
- ❖ Each faith provides a window into God.
  - ★ We need to look for resonances with people of other faiths, not identical beliefs; and be especially respectful about the real differences.
- ❖ Some people will have problems with certain moral elements in one faith (divorce, as an easy example) that are repugnant to another faith.

As we discover how to be partners in the "Missio Dei", God's endeavor to save the world, we can have integrity. Our lessons challenge us to have

beautiful feet. And they do not allow us to renege, either because of our own discomfort, unclarity or fear.

It is almost a cliché to say that our post-modern, or even post-post modern, pluralistic, secular, relativistic, non-rational and skeptical culture – is looking for meaning.

If we do not tell our story of meaning;

if we hold back our experience of transformation; Someone else will tell their story; and we have only to be awake to know that there is no guarantee that it will be "good news".

- ❖ There are many who think us religiously stupid.
- ❖ Many who teach the fear of God in others.
- ❖ Some who claim to have cornered the truth.
- ❖ Some who use violence to make their point.
- ❖ Some who gloss over the complexities of the human spirit.

And for the sake of our own psychological integrity, we cannot hide, trying to pass in the secular culture as non-searchers, non-believers, non-Christians. There is a word that saves. And it can be carried by our beautiful feet. We are not the "ugly Christian" when:

- ❖ We tell the world about the God's promise to redeem the whole Creation.
- ❖ When we welcome anyone of any tribe or tongue, any faith and no faith, to join this Servant fellowship as, **and only as**, they are moved by the Holy Spirit.
- ❖ And when we witness to, and celebrate the redemptive grace of Christ wherever it is, however it is named, and to join it at work in the world.

We come to the table at the start of our Journey to Bethlehem to remember our story, to make the invitation, and to encounter the mystery of God.