

How to Have Beautiful Feet
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If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” -- Romans 10:9-15, NIV

This week, in preparation for this message, I Googled the title of my sermon: “How to Have Beautiful Feet.” It was interesting what popped up. One website began this way: “Beautiful feet are acquired. They come from attention to details and dedication, but it's not really that hard. Just a few habits you can learn can easily get used to. Soon they'll be second-nature, and you'll be taken by surprise when people compliment your lovely feet!” And another said this: “Beautiful feet can be dreams come true. There are many steps you can take to make your feet beautiful. This information will help you learn more about how to bring out the beauty in your feet.” Maybe if Paul were writing his letter to the Romans today, when he got to the part we just read about beautiful feet, Paul might add that last line: “This information will help you learn more about how to bring out the beauty in your feet.” Today we are going to be looking at these words from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome as good information that may help us bring out the beauty in our feet -- but in a slightly different way.

When it comes to our feet, most of us probably feel a little humbled or embarrassed by them. There are not too many folks I know who go around and ask people to look at their feet. Their new haircut – sure. If we have a new workout regime or diet, we may want people to notice our toned-up physique, but not our feet. There is something humbling about our feet, isn’t there?

Neal and I were talking this week about this passage and he brought up how we as pastors often go into hospital rooms to visit folks when they are not looking their best. The gown, tubes, no makeup, hair is not done. But Neal also noted that many times simply because folks are lying in bed, we often see their feet. And while that may be embarrassing to some of us, Neal noted that as pastors there is something almost sacred and special about being there to minister to someone when they are not at their best -- even when they have their feet hanging out. It is humbling for both patient and pastor.

This morning I thought we could all take off our shoes and show our feet to each other. Maybe we could have a “beautiful feet contest,” but I know that would probably send most of us running for the door. It may also be one of the reasons a foot washing service is not something I hear lots of church members asking for us to do at JCPC, and maybe that is understandable. Talking about our feet seems a little unseemly, doesn’t it? So why in the world does Paul end these words we have read this morning with this phrase: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!”

Part of the answer comes from what Paul is trying to do in this letter to the church at Rome. Paul is trying to convince them that his primary mission in sharing the good news of God's love made known in the person of Jesus Christ is to the Gentiles and not just the Jews. Now Paul has been going to towns and the first thing he often did was find the Jewish synagogue and begin telling about this Jesus whom Paul believed was the Messiah promised by God. Paul spent lots of time arguing with the Jews, and while some believed, not all did by any means. But Paul has a strong sense that this Messiah is not just for the Jews, but for all of humankind. Jesus is not just the savior of the Jews, he comes to save everyone. So Paul is making the case that anyone who believes that Jesus is Lord, who confesses with his or her mouth, and who believes it in his or her heart – those persons, even if they are Gentiles, will be saved. And Paul is saying this so that other believers who happen to be Jews will understand why his primary mission is to those who are not Jews. Peter and the others can handle the mission to the Jews. Paul is going for everyone else.

Paul then uses four questions to set up not only the process for how one hears the good news about Jesus, but also to establish the need for folks to be sent out to do this important, life-changing work. Paul says: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?" (Romans 10:14-15a, NIV) Paul is saying that not only do folks need to hear the good news, but someone needs to be sent to do this good work, and Paul believes he is one of those folks. But the sending out is an important part of the process because one gets the sense that Paul would like the endorsement of other Christians to support his work. In other words, he doesn't do this as a "Lone Ranger" all on his own. Paul sees this work as being most effective when there are others who send him out and support him.

Last weekend, you may have heard that a former member of this church family, Sheryl Sumlin-Barclay, was ordained in Florida as a Presbyterian minister of word and sacrament. It is exciting when someone from this church family feels the call of God to go into fulltime ministry. Two couples from our congregation, the Bradleys and the McKenzies, went down there for the service of ordination. I wrote a letter on behalf of our Session that was read at the service. But when Sheryl was ordained, she didn't just stand up and ordain herself. She didn't say, "I'm going to do this all on my own." No, that whole service was structured with the participation of representatives from the Presbytery there in Florida as a symbol that she was being sent out -- not in her own power and authority -- but by the authority of the Presbyterian Church with the power of the Holy Spirit. She was being sent out to do ministry. And we are all a part of that, not only because of what happened in her faith journey when she was part of this church family, but because we are a part of the larger church that sent her out. Paul is also saying that in order for the good news to be shared, someone needs to be sent out to preach the good news.

So what do the "beautiful feet" of those that are sent to bring such good news look like today? I do find it interesting that Paul talks about a lot of body parts in these few verses. He talks about the *mouth* with which we speak, and the *heart* with which we believe. Then he ends up with this line about beautiful *feet*. It is a quotation from the prophet Isaiah found in our Old Testament. (Isaiah 52:7) Prior to this, Paul has also quoted from another verse in Isaiah (28:16) and as well as from the book of Joel (2:32). Paul quotes the Old Testament here because he wants to make sure his Jewish readers know he is talking about the Messiah sent from God. But this final line from the book of Isaiah focuses on the feet of those who bring the good news. These are the ones *sent to preach* the good news to others.

Now the concept of preaching is one that maybe is unclear these days. In fact, we might have a really good discussion if we were to go around the room and ask not only what we mean by “preaching” -- but what makes preaching *good*. Scholar Tom Long has suggested that about every fifty years preaching has a nervous breakdown and loses its mind – trying to reinvent itself, while wondering if it is still effective. Long suggests we are in such a transition time now when it comes to preaching. Maybe.

From time to time I have heard someone say, “Stop preaching at me” or “Don’t go preaching at me” as a way of say something negative about what one is saying, or how they are saying it. Face it; no one likes to be preached *at*. But Paul seems to be saying that in order for others to hear the good news; someone needs to be sent out to preach. And maybe this is where you as church members say, “Well, you’re the preacher. Isn’t that what we pay you to do?” That sort of implies that when it comes to preaching, everyone else but the “paid preacher” is off the hook. And in one sense that is true. But in another sense, I think Paul is beginning to let us see that having beautiful feet from the perspective of the Bible, and from God’s perspective, means that *each one of us needs to be open to sharing the good news wherever our feet may take us*. And when we do that, we find out what it means to have beautiful feet. Or, to put a new twist on the old cliché, *you have to not only talk the talk -- you have to walk the walk*. In other words, we have to go with our feet and then share the good news with our mouths – and that’s what makes our feet “beautiful” in the sight of God.

Joanna Adams is a friend, a retired Presbyterian pastor, and a noted preacher. Joanna told this personal story about foot washing in one of her sermons:

I have seen many real winners in the years that I have been a minister. One who comes to mind this morning is a young man who was an advertising executive on the rise in his profession. At that time, both he and I were part of a downtown church in Atlanta. I saw him often, because every Tuesday evening he volunteered at the foot clinic for the homeless people who made their home in our church gymnasium. Robert was the nattiest dresser I believe I have ever seen. I can picture him in my mind’s eye now, wearing red suspenders and sitting on a stool before a chair on which one of our homeless guests sat. I can see him taking the guest’s feet and placing them in a basin of warm water. I can see him taking a towel and drying the feet, then applying ointment to their sores. The ritual always ended with a gift of a clean, white pair of socks. Often the recipient of the socks would be moved to tears, a tough man who had not been touched with such tenderness since his mind could remember. I once asked Robert why he came every week. He brushed me aside, saying, “I just figure I have a better chance of running into Jesus here than most other places.” As I watched him week after week, I realized that I was developing double vision. I was seeing Christ in the stranger and also seeing Christ in the one who found the true meaning of his life in serving others.

Sometimes the beautiful feet that bring us the good news may not seem that beautiful at first. But, in sharing the good news of God’s love with others through our words and our actions, we, too might discover God’s grace in the beautiful and not-so-beautiful feet of others.

You may remember that according to John’s gospel, before Jesus shared that Last Supper with his disciples, he washed their feet. It was a very humbling experience for everyone. At first the disciples did not know what to make of it. It was kind of embarrassing for Jesus to wash their feet, but he was showing them the good news in this very simple gesture. It let them know that soon it was going to be up to each of them to share the good news with others and that is what would make their feet beautiful.

It is still true today -- our feet take us to places like homeless shelters, hospitals, Haiti or Hospice. Or simply to stand beside someone who is going through a hard time and needs the love of Jesus in some way. Where will your feet take you this week? Will you have beautiful feet, not because of some expensive treatment, but because they take you to the place where God most needs you to go?

Frederick Buechner, author and Presbyterian minister, writes about this passage with these words: "Generally speaking, if you want to know you really are as distinct from who you like to think you are, keep an eye on your feet and where they take you." (From *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, page 27)

So this week, may your beautiful feet take you to the place God needs you most – a place where, in your own unique way, you can share the good news of God's love for everyone.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.