

Sermon for September 18, 2022—"Shoe Man"

Twenty-fifth Sunday in OT, Year C—Texts: 1 Samuel 16:1, 4-12; Luke 16:19-31

I showered and shaved; I adjusted my tie. I got there and sat in a pew just in time. Bowing my head in prayer, as I closed my eyes, I saw the shoe of the man next to me, touching my own. I sighed. With plenty of room on either side, "Why must our soles touch?" It bothered me, his shoe touching mine.

A prayer began: "Our Father..." I thought, "This man with the shoes has no pride. They're dusty, worn, and scratched. Even worse, there are holes on the side!"

"Thank you for blessings," the prayer went on. The shoe-man said a quiet "Amen." I tried to focus on the prayer. But my thoughts were on his shoes again. "Aren't we supposed to look our best when walking through that door? Well, this certainly isn't it," I thought, glancing toward the floor. Then the prayer was ended.

And the songs of praise began. The shoe-man was certainly loud...sounding proud as he sang. His voice lifted the rafters. His hands were raised high. The Lord could surely hear the shoe-man's voice from the sky. It was time for the offering and what I threw in was steep. I watched as the shoe man reached into his pockets—so deep. I saw what was pulled out; what the shoe man put in. I heard a soft "clink." The sermon really bored me. To tears, and that's no lie. It was the same for the shoe man, for tears fell from his eyes.

At the end of the service—as is our custom here—we must greet new visitors, and show them all good cheer. But I felt moved somehow and wanted to meet the shoe man. So after the closing prayer I reached over and shook his hand. He was old and his skin was dark; and his hair was truly a mess. But I thanked him for coming; for being our guest. He said, "My name's Charlie, I'm glad to meet you, my friend."

There were tears in his eyes, but he had a large, wide grin. "Let me explain," he said—wiping tears from his eyes—I've been coming here for months and you're the first to say "Hi." "I know that my appearance is not like all the rest. But I really do try, to always look my best. I always clean and polish my shoes before my very long walk. But by the time I get here they're dirty and dusty, like chalk."

My heart filled with pain; and I swallowed to hide my tears. As he continued to apologize for daring to sit so near. He said, "When I get here I know I must look a sight. But I thought if I could touch you then maybe our souls might unite." I was silent for a moment, knowing whatever I said would pale in comparison. I spoke from my heart, not my head. "Oh, you've touched me," I said, "and taught me, in part, that the best of any person is what is in his heart." The rest, I thought, this shoe-man will never know. Like just how thankful I really am that his dirty old shoe touched my soul.

Unbeknownst to many in churches today, we as Christians have not "cornered the market" on the inheritance that Jesus promises to those that follow him. And in fact, for those that come to him—not with the lovely clothes they wear, or the fancy car they drive—but with the heart that sincerely and desires God, they are the ones who impress God. No matter how they look on the outside.

This reminds me of a quote by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, in his famous book, *The Little Prince*: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

This echoes the words from our first reading: “...**the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.**”

“The Shoe Man” is an inspirational poem said to be credited to Leanne Freiberg. If nothing else it—like both of this morning’s readings—causes us to rethink how we judge and treat others. It also encourages us to connect with others—to touch them in some way—literally or figuratively.

Pastor John Piper described a time when he ministered to a young woman—actually several times. She would go to the emergency room, because she would cut herself bad enough to need stitches on her stomach. And he’d asked her one time while visiting her in the hospital, “Can you give me any light or help on what goes on in your head? Why are you doing this?”

And what I remember she said was, “I like it when they touch me in the emergency room.”

In thinking about this, he wrote that, “Here is a woman who was overweight, and probably felt very alone, very untouched, very unloved, very un-cared for. She watched the whole world going its way with people hugging each other and loving each other and having friends or being married. And she had this unbelievable ache in her heart to be cared for, to be pitied, to be touched and ministered to. And her unhealthy way of doing it was to hurt herself.”

In these scenarios—including that of the Shoe Man—I believe that we have a lot to offer people. As Christians—followers of Jesus Christ we are called—actually, commanded—to love them. But—and here brothers and sisters—is the thing: We must want to love them. We must want to actually touch them. We must want to connect with them. We never know what may be going on in their lives, but God does. Will we take the risk and the time to connect so they will see Jesus? We may be the one whose soul is truly touched.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.