

August 6, 2006
Isaiah 52:7-10, Galatians 1:1-24
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

"Beautiful Feet"

Paul had beautiful feet. I can see them in my mind's eye. They were heavily veined and calloused feet. They were shod in sandals and exposed to the elements; at times they were marked with cuts, scrapes and bruises from walking on the stone roads and rocky paths of the eastern Mediterranean world. They were dirty feet that traveled through the market places of Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Athens and Corinth. These hot and dusty feet were cooled in streams and by riverbanks. When he was welcomed into homes, these feet were gently washed and anointed with oil by grateful hosts who received the gospel into their hearts. How do I know these were beautiful feet? I know because these hardened feet carried the one who proclaimed the gospel to the Roman world. The prophet Isaiah said:

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." (Isaiah 52:7)

Sometimes the gospel has to be carried on feet that are strong enough to stand up against fierce opposition. There are many times and places in our world when people and movements oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ and try to put down the work of the gospel. People love violence more than peace; they prefer revenge to forgiveness; they look out for their own well-being at the expense of their neighbor. There are many who simply ignore the gospel and dismiss the messengers who bring good news. Not all the voices that speak against the gospel come from outside the church. Even within the church, there are those who misunderstand the gospel, who would change the gospel, who would reduce the gospel to weak platitudes that demand nothing of us or who think the gospel is about what we can achieve through a particular list of do's and don'ts. The transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is lost in the shuffle.

Paul had beautiful feet.....feet that were strong enough to carry the gospel to people and places that had never heard it before.....feet that were strong enough to proclaim the gospel when others came after him teaching something less than the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ.

We tend to think that the modern era invented church controversies. The struggles within the church did not begin with the first or the last meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. Controversies in the church did not begin when Martin Luther first posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church, or when, in Zurich, the reformer Ulrich Zwingli began to preach straight through the gospel of Matthew in the native German tongue, or when John Knox confronted Mary, Queen of Scots. From the very beginning, there have been controversies in the church.

Paul's letter to the Galatians reveals a church that was deeply divided and full of conflict. Maybe some of our modern day churches have become experts in arguing over nothing; but conflict within the church is anything but a modern invention. There are people who would tear the church apart over a particular stand on a single issue. We are not "single issue" Christians, nor are we a single-issue church. How sad it is that people think they can worship only with people who agree with them on everything. While we are not single-issue Christians, we are single-minded in our devotion to Jesus Christ. The church is of one mind in its faithfulness to Christ; but the church is not of one mind on many social and theological concerns.

Like Christians today, the first century church could get embroiled in arguments over non-essential issues like the eating of meat sacrificed to idols and sold in the marketplace or whose gifts for ministry were the most important. The churches in Galatia are not arguing over trivial things. These are not arguments over carpet color, liturgical dance, the use of space, food in the parlor or traditional versus contemporary worship. Nor are the disagreements over the more important questions of ordination standards, war and peace, human sexuality or social justice. As important as these questions are, they are still not the heart of the faith. Paul is writing to churches that are deeply divided over essential matters that touch the heart of the faith. The division in Galatia is over the central question, "What is the Gospel?" Does salvation come through God's unmerited grace or is there something we must do to earn God's favor? Over the next four weeks, we will be studying the letter to the Galatians. We will see how Paul answers this essential question, "What is the Gospel?"

Paul is deeply disturbed about what has happened in the churches of Galatia since his departure. Galatia is a region in central Turkey. On his second missionary journey, Paul preached the gospel and established churches there. Now, things are not going well. The problem is not that the membership is down, the preacher is boring or the budget is low. New teachers have come into the church. The church is divided over their teaching. The people are fighting over the requirements of the Christian life. Some of the leaders are starting to make rules that "real Christians" must follow in order to be saved. Paul says that these teachers are preaching "another gospel" - not that there is another gospel. They are preaching a false gospel that undermines the very truth of the gospel he proclaimed.

The only way Paul can get them to listen is to remind them of his calling. He tells them how he came to hear and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. His hope is that they will hear and believe as well. Paul gives two kinds of evidence for the truth of the gospel that he has proclaimed. First, the truth of the gospel can be seen in how he received it. Second, the truth of the gospel is evident in the transformation that has taken place in his own life. Let us look more closely at these two aspects of Paul's call.

First, Paul vindicates his teaching by telling how he received it. Paul didn't hear the gospel from someone else. He didn't hear the teaching of James or see Peter heal a lame man. In fact, as a pious Jew, he had his heart set against the gospel. We suspect he heard everything Stephen had to say about Jesus; but it didn't move him one bit. It only confirmed his belief that the early Christians were blasphemers. When Stephen was

stoned to death, Paul held the cloaks of those who threw the rocks. He thought God had called him to punish the followers of Jesus. Paul said that he was "violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it."

Paul thought one thing; but God thought something else. God revealed Jesus to Paul on the road to Damascus. Then Paul took time to let the word settle in his life. He went away into Arabia for three years to let Jesus reshape his heart. Only then did he go to Jerusalem to talk with Peter and others about his calling.

How do we receive the truth? Those early Christians who encountered the Risen Lord have given us the Scriptures so that we might encounter Jesus through the word of God. The Bible is not just any book. The Bible is the written word of God through which we encounter the living word of God, Jesus Christ. When we read the Scriptures, we are not reading history, biography or a set of laws to follow. We read the Bible to experience the presence of Jesus through the stories and teachings of Scripture.

To some of us, the Bible seems so familiar that we hardly hear it anymore. We think we know the story; but what we know is a watered-down, artificially sweetened blend of everything we've ever heard about Jesus. When we read the Bible with imagination, passion and hunger, we encounter the living Lord just as Paul did on the road to Damascus.

The second way we discern the truth of the gospel is by its power to transform our lives. When Paul encounters the risen Lord, his life takes a whole new direction. Paul, the devout Jew, discovers that the same Jesus he was persecuting is now calling him to proclaim the gospel among the Gentiles. Paul knew that God had given him the calling to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. Paul sees that God has a plan for his whole life. God had set him apart for this particular ministry before he was born. His life has gone in a completely different direction until Jesus stops him dead in his tracks on the road to Damascus. The truth of the gospel Paul proclaims is evident in its power to Paul's life. The church glorified God because they saw how the Lord had transformed Paul's life.

In all the struggles we face in our lives and in all the controversies that whirl around us, it is easy to lose our bearing and to become uncertain of the truth. When I am uncertain about which way to go, what teaching to believe or which voice to follow, I look for the signs of Christ's transforming grace in those who teach, lead and speak. Do I see signs of Christ's grace, compassion, courage, devotion to God and love for others in those who would teach the gospel to me? If I do not experience God's love flowing out of those who talk about love, then I can be pretty sure that what they are teaching is not gospel.

So we come to the final question. Is the gospel we hear transforming our lives into the image of Christ? I believe that Jesus Christ is calling us to be "gospel people." We may have one thing in mind for our lives; but Christ has a better idea. Sometimes, we are so busy with our own plans that we hardly hear God speak or let God's word touch our hearts. If we think that Christianity is nothing more than a set of rules to live by, a faith based on fear and judgment, a religion that says "no" and never "yes," or a miserable, restrictive and burdensome way of living, then we have not heard the gospel. When we feel Christ weaning us away from our selfishness, helping us face our addictions, teaching us how to

love unconditionally and showing us how to give joyfully, then we are beginning to hear the same gospel Paul heard and believed. If what we hear is anything less than this, then you can be sure it is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel helps us discern Christ's calling in our lives. The true gospel, the only gospel, leads us from sin to grace, from fear to joy, from suspicion to love and from bondage to freedom. The true gospel sets our feet in motion and makes them something beautiful for God.

Some years ago I accompanied our 8th grade confirmation class on an urban mission retreat to Atlanta. We stayed in a downtown church and worked at a homeless shelter. In the morning, we rose early to serve a hot breakfast at a soup kitchen hosted by a Catholic Church. After Morning Prayer, we prepared the tables and the food in time to receive the hundreds of guests who came to eat breakfast. In a small roped-off section of the room, a volunteer nurse practiced her special ministry. She washed the feet of the homeless. One by one, her guests would take a seat as she knelt before them. She removed their old shoes, dirty socks and washed their feet. She treated their sores, blisters and calluses and anointed their feet with fragrant ointment. She gave them new socks and, whenever possible, new shoes. She knew that all those feet she touched had the potential of being beautiful feet for Christ. Even though I never saw her feet, I know that they were beautiful too. They carried her to stand up against those people who say the homeless don't matter, the addicted are a lost cause and the working poor can fend for themselves. She preached the gospel by what she did and she refused to let anybody say that the gospel was anything less than the power of God to transform a life by the grace of Christ. When our confirmation class gathered together for our devotional, they praised God because of her.

Go home, take off your shoes. In the light of Christ's gospel, see what beautiful, powerful feet God has given you. The word is true: "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!"