

Cool Shoes
“Offer them Christ.”
Matthew 28:16-20

Sixth in the series, Xtreme Love: lessons from the Methodist heart

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February 15, 2009
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Tijuana

I had never been to Mexico. So I took my passport to San Diego last week, talked a friend who was going to the same conference to do the same and started talking about going to Tijuana as soon as we arrived at the conference center. I thought maybe I'd stop in some store to buy gifts for the family; some souvenir from the country to the south marking my first venture there. The photographer who took our pictures asked us, “Why would you want to do that? We thought he was just being negative. So we boarded the trolley that took us through town and down the coast line to the American border town, San Ysidro, and with a large red, white and green flag rising above the dwellings and buildings on the hillside ahead, we walked over the bridge that led to Tijuana. What follows is not what all of Mexico is like – not even all of Tijuana; I know it was just a slice of the life. But this was the slice.

Rounding the corner from the tourist center we walked along a street full of shops where there was a line of shop owners and clerks standing outside their doors waiting for us. Then they came at us some of them approaching and standing in our path holding necklaces and watches and calling us in, badgering us into their shops. My friend has blonde hair and fair complexion. We were wearing dress slacks and sport coats, the uniform of middle-aged, Middle American Yanks. I think we stood out.

“Hey, Amigo! Come into my store.” This came even from the pharmacies, “Do you need some medicine!” And from everywhere: “Professor: come here, get a beer, eat some tacos.” “Friends: come and buy something for your neighbor’s wife!” “Mr. Whiskers, come in and look at our authentic, imitation Rolexes.” And it was like that for more than a mile down the Boulevard Revolución and all the way back to the bridge.

I never did enter a store. I never ate a taco and I never stopped to look at their serapes or castanets or carvings. The truth was their efforts to win my patronage drove me away. I thought, “If they are like that on the street, what would happen if I went into their store?” I did my best to ignore them, all of them.

Their come-ons were turn-offs. Like telemarketers who won't quit calling at dinner time or car salesmen who yell from the television commercial. At least for me, pushing pushes me away.

So when you walk down the street and there's a man with a bull horn standing on a milk carton preaching to the world about sin and the end times, what are you apt to do? A few of our church who attended a Wednesday night class last fall might remember the DVD that was played, presented by Rob Bell, who is a pastor on the west side of Michigan. He told about a guy standing outside an auditorium yelling through a bullhorn. You could hear words like, "Jesus," and "sin" and "hell." He had tracks in his hand that he would have handed to people, but everyone was just passing by him, trying to pretend that he just wasn't there. Bell wanted to say some things to the "bull horn guy," that though he knew he meant well but people are tired of this and it makes people end up painting him and Bell and me with the same kind of brush.

That's true, isn't it? It kind of makes the very word, *evangelism* something to avoid. So, when there's a knock on the door and a couple are standing there with books in their hands and they ask you what you think the world is coming to or something about your personal faith, would you invite them in?

Most of us probably wouldn't. We'd try to be polite and do our best to cut the conversation short. Thanks but no thanks.

And after that, the thought of sharing faith, if it had to look like that, just doesn't seem to fit who we are. So, for a lot of the world, *evangelism* just isn't a welcome idea.

Euagellion

The Gospel of Matthew has this beautiful, hopeful ending. After Jesus has been born and visited by Magi who were drawn to him by the star shining bright; you are given a picture of Jesus' life, announcing a new world people could live in, right in this one where the hurting are healed and comforted, and the poor get all that they need. In the world Jesus offered, there would be the kind of justice where the oppressed would be free, peace would prevail, and people would be so connected to God that his love would set the tone for all our living. And he said that we could choose to join the world of justice and hope and it would make you alive in ways you couldn't imagine. He was willing to go the cross in order to give us that world. Then, at the end of the gospel, when his resurrection has proven that this world he gave us could be true, he takes his friends to the mountain and tells them, now, it's their turn to pass it on.

Now, go everywhere and make disciples, he says, and I will be with you always. Go and be religious hucksters? I don't think that's what he meant. I think that what he meant can be understood when you know a little about the history of announcing good news.

In ancient times people lived mostly in city states, with some growing into larger kingdoms and empires when their armies seized territory and riches and slaves from neighboring city states. In those days there was no Geneva Convention; no rules of warfare to follow. If you lived in a city and an invading army neared, your army would go out to do battle. Then you'd better hope that your forces prevailed because if they didn't all you could expect was terrible devastation. Your army would be annihilated. Your city would be sacked and burned. Most people would be put to the sword. The rest would be forced into slavery as they watched the complete devastation of home. Any life lived after that would be absolutely brutal. You would be less than human. You could never go home again.

So if the invaders came near and the army went out, all the people would take on the posture of those who were living as though they had already died. They would trade the clothing they wore for sack cloth and pour ashes over their heads. They would look down at the ground as they walked and they would live in the dust as those who had no longer any life to live.

That can be a picture of what life is like for a lot of people. Jesus knew how people were living defeated lives then. And now there are still so many people whose living has really stopped. Recently I talked to a guy who had no identity. He'd been living on the streets and had lost his identification papers and for him, it was one of those Catch-22's: without an ID he couldn't apply for Social Security assistance or get a job or a place to stay. Without a driver's license or a state ID he couldn't get his birth certificate and without his birth certificate he couldn't get an ID. Catch 22. He was lost and nobody cared. You don't have to be on the streets to live without hope, though. You could be trapped in the prison of some bad choice of the past. You could be overwhelmed by the prospect of losing a job or you can be trapped in a job that does you no good. An illness or a hundred other things are capable of making you live in the dust like there's no longer any life, There are scores of people living around us, at our work and in our neighborhoods and in our families who live in the dust.

Jesus came to raise them up. Jesus gave his life for the life of the world.

Back to the ancient city under siege: if your army had gone out to meet the invaders you'd have sackcloth on and would hold out no hope. But if your army won the test and put the invader to flight, your soldiers would pursue the fleeing enemy to cut off their retreat and break their power completely so they could never regroup to attack again. All of your army would run after them, except one soldier. His mission would send him running back and not stop until he reached the city. He would pass through the city gates and there announce the good news. The good news of victory: the day is won!

And the people would hear it, and rise from their ashes to dance in the streets. No longer oppressed by the rule of death: now they live.

The soldier who came bearing the good news was known in the Greek language as the *euagellion*, which means *good angel*, or *good messenger*. That's the root and the purpose of our words *evangel* and *evangelism*.²

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.'³

So says the prophet Isaiah. The messenger comes across the mountains and into the town with the word that restores hope and raises the people to life. How cool upon the mountains are the shoes of the messenger: anyone with that kind of message will be welcome any time.

Jesus came to confront the powers...and free you and everyone from whatever it is that traps and oppresses and sucks the life out of you. The good news is: Jesus is victorious. No matter what you or your neighbor has had to deal with, God has taken it and already won. Because of Jesus, there is, once again, a future. And as you pull up to the group standing around the Risen Lord at the mountain and hear the same words they heard, "Go therefore into all the world making disciples," you get to be the one with the cool shoes.

This is the last lesson for the present series of *Xtreme Love: lessons from the Methodist Heart*. Through it we spent most of our time considering the incredible grace of God and how it makes a difference in life. Now we wind up recipients, participants and partners, given incredibly good news to announce to others. We are sent.

Listen to Speak

Sent to tell the story. That has been the Methodist passion through the years. Sent, not with bull horns but with cool shoes, ready to share the good news with some love and a smile of our own.

There's a picture that hangs in the libraries of a number of United Methodist Churches and schools that shows John Wesley standing on a Liverpool pier with Francis Asbury, who was on his way to America and would one day emerge as the leader of American Methodists. In the picture they can be seen bidding one another a fond and final farewell. It's the caption of the painting, though, that stands out to me. It's simply Wesley's words to Asbury, "Offer them Christ."

No bull horn is necessary to do that. All you need is to learn and do what Jesus taught and care for others the way Jesus loved. All you need is the love of God and a smile, and warmth enough to invite others to walk with you on the journey of faith. Really, if you've ever invited someone to come with you to a party, you already have the boldness to do that. All it takes is readiness to listen to another's story, willingness to share some of your own, and perhaps, when the time is right, the generosity to extend an invitation to share time with you at church. I like to say that worship goes well with brunch.

After our youth mission trip banquet late last summer I left church by the Lafayette door in the back of the building. There were a couple of women standing on the sidewalk, reading a plaque on the brick of the church. One of them noticed me and asked, "Maybe you can tell us. What does this mean: *A LATEX.-FREE BUILDING*'?" I explained to them that members of our church had become aware that some people have awful allergies to latex, a plastic used in lots of rubber gloves and balloons; and out of care for them and a desire to be a healthy place, we decided to do our best to keep our building free of those things. I told them we wanted to have a safe and healthy place for people, and we wanted people to know that.

She seemed impressed. "Wow," he said, "it makes me want to come."

I want you to know that I did not say to her, "Amigo, Mr. Whiskers, come inside and buy what I have to sell!" But how easy do you think it was at that point to say, "Well, I hope you do come sometime. We'd be happy to see you?"

Offer them Christ. For you, it may turn out to be the easiest thing in the world.

References

- [1] Rob Bell, "Bullhorn". Grand Rapids, Michigan: Nooma. © 2004.
- [2] The description of ancient warfare is taken from discussion provided in the School of Evangelism, a United Methodist General Board of Discipleship training program presented in 1977.
- [3] Isaiah 52:7