

“New shoes in a new season”

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Faith, and spiritual disciplines in particular, are an awful lot like a pair of shoes.

This past week, I finally broke down and bought a new pair of shoes for walking and working out. After several years, the sole on my old pair was quite literally falling off the shoe. And in many ways, the spiritual life and today's lessons share much in common with that transaction.

Let us consider first, the well-worn shoes. They are in many ways still comfortable, and as far as shoes go, may well still be useful. They cover our feet, get us from A to B, and generally do what we expect of them. That is until we start looking at the closer details. Once pristine, the stains are now permanent. Any arch support they once had has long since given up the ghost. And we've probably restrung the laces at least once on them. But we hold on to them just the same. We stick with what we know and with what is comfortable to us.

Do you ever find that to be true of the spiritual life? I do. I find what works, and I stick with it. I am, as most of us are, a creature of habit, and if I don't have to change, I often won't. I get comfortable, and comfort isn't a bad thing. That is until it leads us to start overlooking the details. What was once fresh has become a bit stale. That which once motivated us now just barely gets us going if at all. And no matter how much we try to revamp it, we just can't seem to get the old spark back. Yes, sometimes the spiritual life and the disciplines we follow can begin to feel like a comfortable old pair of shoes. They get the job done, but only in a minimal way.

Now consider today's Gospel passage. The disciples have been spending an awful lot of time with Jesus. He has been teaching and preaching and healing, and it is quite possible that they have been getting rather comfortable with Jesus. I know I do from time to time. I begin to think that I have Jesus figured out, that I understand his ways and his plans for me. And while that works for a little while, maybe a day, there usually comes a point where Jesus has to surprise us once again.

“And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.”

What are the apostle's responses to this? They think he's a ghost. Despite everything that they have seen and know about Jesus, they don't have him figured out just yet. And when we get complacent, we need a spiritual wake up call of our own. We need to try on some new shoes for our walk with Jesus.

One of the first things I did with my new shoes on Friday was to go for a short walk, maybe 15 minutes. About 5 minutes in I entered that dreaded break in phase, and for the next 10 minutes I walked and I chaffed the heels and Achilles on both feet, until finally I returned home. My feet, just short of blistered, were hot and sore, and my first instinct was to throw the shoes in the box and take them back to the store.

But I didn't because I knew that it had been so long since I bought new shoes, there was little chance that any others would fare much better. My old shoes had little to no backing left in heel, whereas these new ones were firm and strong. My arches ached with support that I had long forgotten came with shoes. I was uncomfortable, and I didn't like it, and I knew that there was only one thing left to do. Take them for another walk on Saturday.

Our spiritual lives get in a rut at times, and while our old habits and routines can sustain us, they often cannot support us in the phase of life we have entered. What worked in the last season may not be a good fit anymore. It doesn't make the old bad and the new good, it just makes us realize there are different times in our lives of faith. And as a brief aside, the same can be said for whole churches as well.

Think about Jonah for a moment. He runs away from God, ends up in the belly of the great fish, reluctantly proclaims the Word of the Lord, and then sits like a sourpuss when God doesn't burn the place down

with brimstone and fire. Does it seem like what Jonah is doing is working for him? Not so much. Does the Lord use it just the same? Sure, but a change of heart, perspective, and discipline can reorient things in the light of God.

Yes, there will be some chaffing along the way. There has to be as our rough edges are smoothed over by God's grace at work in us. Consider Peter, thinking he has what it takes, stepping out of the boat. The first few steps are good, but then everything else sets in and he takes his eyes off of Jesus. When we start looking at the things which are going on around us rather than focusing on the one toward whom we walk, of course the new plan is going to feel like a failure. We're looking at reasons for it not to work.

When we look at the struggles of Christians around the world, at the division within our country, it is easy to leave our Jesus shoes in the closet and just put our heads down in the hope that no one will notice. But when we fix our eyes on Christ, we can push through the discomfort. We learn when to stop to avoid injury, and when to push for new goals and growth. There is some break-in each time we make a change, each time we start a new Bible reading plan or personal prayer schedule or mutual accountability or study or service or evangelism or stewardship or whatever.

The life of faith is very much like a pair of shoes. And in time, we find that the two meet in the middle. Our new disciplines toughen up some weak spots even as they ease in to the shape of our life and help to take us where we ought to go. And where we ought to go is to the heart of the Gospel, not only in our heads and in our hearts, but in our hands as well.

The spiritual life we lead when we walk out of this place is a continuation of what we do here. When we renounce the works of sin and darkness and death at Baptism and Jesus breaks into the life of the baptized to bring grace and light and life, we walk out and share the same with those who are at war with themselves, their neighbors, their sin. When we are nourished at the altar of the Lord, we stride out to feed the world, spiritually and literally. When our wounds are bound up by intercession and anointing, we step out and offer the hand of peace and the healing love of Christ to those most in need. And when we admit our sins against God and our neighbor and hear the sweet words of God's mercy and love toward us, we stand out there and confront the atrocities of this life, not passing judgement upon others but naming sin for what it is so that we may show the better way, the only way, the way of the cross of Jesus Christ.

The past few years have seen a world ravaged by sin as the church is suppressed abroad and the nation tears itself apart. We who are in Christ, regardless of where we are personally, must lace up and walk out into the midst of it. Because there are some who have not seen or heard or understood what this is all about. Many think that they have Jesus all figured out. They have heard his story, they have seen some of his people, and they don't want to buy what he is selling. For even though they know the story of the Passion, they do not know the crucified Christ. And though they have heard of the Resurrection, they have not met the risen Lord.

But we have, and we have been equipped to go forth into the fray. We have put on Christ, and we take on the disciplines of the faith. And having done that, when we look around us, we begin to hear and understand the words which St. Paul speaks to the Romans, "my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren."

As we begin a new school year, it is a good time for us to consider how our spiritual footwear is faring and to see where it is taking us. Is it time to try something new in a new season? Or are you in the sweet spot with comfort and support for your soul? Have you got Jesus figured out for the time being or is he walking to you on the water and calling you out of the boat? Don't be afraid to try on a new pair of shoes for the journey of faith. Don't be afraid of where those shoes may take you. There is no doubt that the Lord will save, for he is truly the Son of God.