

Psalm 57

¹Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.

²I cry to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.

³He will send from heaven and save me, he will put to shame those who trample on me. Selah God will send forth his steadfast love and his faithfulness.

⁴I lie down among lions that greedily devour human prey; their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongues sharp swords.

⁵Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth.

⁶They set a net for my steps; my soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my path, but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah

⁷My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast. I will sing and make melody.

⁸Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.

⁹I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations.

¹⁰For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds.

¹¹Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth.

John 8: 2-11

²Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

The Red Shoe

It was a single red tennis shoe. Sitting, or rather, laying on the side of the road on 19E on my way to Newdale. Just the one shoe. A high-top. Not just a regular shoe but something with character. Black sole; red sides. It really caught my eye. It made me wonder why there was just the one shoe. Was the other one somewhere in the tall grass or was there just the one? How did it get there?

Obviously a shoe for a younger person, I guess. Did they accidentally lose it? Did they toss it out the car window or did it fall out of the back of the truck? Perhaps a friend threw it out as a dare or out of anger or jealousy. Kind of gets your imagination going doesn't it? What kind of person would just throw away a good shoe? Maybe he or she was having a really bad day at school; failed the test or lost the game, rejected in love, disappointed in life? Maybe in anger or despair she threw away something that others had teased her about or condemned her for wearing; or they were a gift from someone who hurt her that day. Curious.

It may also be that she or he threw them out the window as an act of courage. The thrill of letting something go that defined them for which they wanted to be at last free of. A new me. A new style. A new beginning. A single shoe, a red shoe along the side of the road. So many ways to consider that shoe and its history. It seems

that everyone and every-thing has a story. There is meaning in the simplest of things. That even our shoes tell something about us. Curious.

Jesus had been teaching in the temple for a couple of days prior to our reading this morning. And as usual, this morning he had been out praying alone just before the sun came up. And after his time in prayer he headed into town on his way to the temple. As he came into the city he noticed folks getting ready for the day. Shop keepers were setting out their wares and goods. Fruits and vegetables were being neatly stacked and covered from the early morning sun. The day was just getting started. It was going to be another hot one. It was then that he noticed there along the side of the road, a single solitary sandal. It was a fairly new sandal, he could tell by the quality of the leather, and the sole was hardly worn. It was small, probably a woman's. He wondered about it. A lone sandal there along the road. what happened? Did she throw it at someone in anger? Was it an act of defiance or celebration? Curious! Where was the other sandal? These things usually come in pairs.

But then he noticed the footprints. Not sure why he didn't see them before but there, around the one sandal, there were many other foot prints in the dirt. It looked like a crowd had gathered around it; a struggle of some kind. And then the trail lead into the city. Curiouser and curiouser! Now being the preacher that he was he was already thinking about how he might turn this into a story or a parable and not wanting to waste a good illustration, he picked up the sandal and put it in the folds of his robe and continued on his way to the temple.

When he arrived there was already a crowd gathered around waiting for him. Everyone it seemed was hungry to hear what he had to say and so as was his custom, he sat among them and began to share the story. He told them the story of God's love. That God had not come to condemn them but to love them. that God is a God of mercy and grace and forgiveness and justice. That God the Father loved them more than they could possible imagine or know. A love that was broader than the stars in the sky and deeper than the depths of the seas. So turn around! Turn back to the One who loves you. Come home and taste and see that God is good. That God is with us on all the dusty roads of our lives.

He was thinking about that sandal in his pocket and was just about to make up a story about it when he saw them. A group of religious leaders were coming in through the temple doors and they were dragging what appeared to be a woman with them. They threw her at his feet and then the accusations began. "We caught this woman in the act of adultery! "Shameful! Sinner! The law says she should be stoned! What do you say? What do you say, Jesus?" There were murmurs throughout the crowd.

It was a test of course. They all knew it. Jesus takes a moment and he looks them all in the eyes. The accusers are unflinching in their anger and hatred. They all have stones in their hands and hearts. He bends down and raises the woman's face to him and he sees that she has a few bruises and cuts on her face. Her clothes, which are of good quality, are torn and covered in dirt. Her hair is disheveled and tears are running silently down her cheeks. She knows that she could be killed this very day. She knows what being stoned to death looks like and sounds like. She's seen it happen to others in her lifetime and it is a terrible and painful death. Jesus is her only hope and she's not sure he can save her now.

Jesus kneels down beside her and does the strangest thing. He starts drawing in the sand; doodling in the dirt. Was he just stalling? Was he just messing with them? Was he praying? Was he symbolically reminding them that from dust you were made and to dust you shall return? That it is only by God's grace and mercy that you are here at all? He waits, he hears, he listens, as the Holy Spirit speaks to him. And then he stops, brushes the dirt from his hands and says those eternal words of grace-filled challenge, "Let those of you who have no sin cast the first stone." And then he sits back down and continues to draw in the dust.

For a minute at least, there was absolute silence. It was as if they were afraid to breath. You could hear them struggle with what he had said and you could see the doubt and confusion in their faces. And then, one by one, the stones dropped from once angry hands. THUD! THUMP! THUNK! (I'm dropping real stones here)

As they hit the ground each stone became a macabre chime of forgiveness and a reminder that none of us is without serious shortcomings and that God is merciful to sinners.

And one by one those who came to condemn left the temple until only Jesus and the woman remained along with a few other faithful ones. Jesus asked her, "Where are those who would condemn you?" "They are all gone", she said. And Jesus said, "I don't condemn you either."

It was just then that he noticed she was only wearing one sandal. He was nearly overcome with the serendipity of it, though he knew these things happen to him quite often. He was still surprised by God's sense of humor. With a glint in his own eyes he pulled the sandal from his robe and gave it to her saying, "I believe this is yours. Put it on and go home. And try to do better tomorrow. Ok? Go in peace and remember, God loves you."

I love this story. And while it is only found in John's gospel, it speaks to me deeply of the character of the God we serve, love, and follow. It reminds, particularly in this day and age, that Jesus stands between us and those who would condemn us. Jesus stands between all those who have been condemned and continue to be condemned by the self-righteous. He stands between those who condemn others for their beliefs, their lifestyles, the color of their skin, their addictions, their homelessness, their sexual orientation, their politics, or their patriotism, and he says, "Bring it on! Let me show you what real Love can do. Let me show you what is really important about living as a child of God in this world. Let me show you what forgiveness and mercy and grace can do to heal the broken people of the world. And then put on your sandals or your boots or your fancy pumps or your red top sneakers and follow me! Follow me!

Where are those who would condemn you? They are gone! And I don't condemn you either. Go in peace and do better tomorrow and the next day and the next day after that. And remember, God loves you." Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Written by John van de Laar

Lord Jesus, in You we recognize what life can be:
Recklessly loving, abundantly forgiving, and limitlessly free.
Thank You for offering this life to us again, now.
Thank You for removing the barriers that would keep us from this life,
and for making us new again.
We praise You for the way You lived – opening doors of pain and guilt,
and releasing captives.
We praise You for the way You died – forgiving sinners,
and denying revenge.
We praise You for the way You returned from death – opening graves,
and re-awakening hopes and dreams.
And, we praise You for the way You come to us now –
stirring love in our hearts, and passion in our lives.
Amen.