

A Ash Wednesday 2.22.23

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

Focus Statement: Grace is even earlier than we think.

While I was on leave, Travis and I took advantage of both of us having Sundays off and went to Lexington, Kentucky for a long weekend. Why Lexington? Because it was warmer than Michigan and we could drive there. The Sunday we were in Lexington, we got up that morning and went to worship at this great little Episcopal congregation on the south side of the city. The rector of that congregation is also the author of one of my favorite books on ministry, and her sermon did not disappoint, it was exactly what I needed. After church we drove about an hour to Natural Bridge State Park and spent the afternoon hiking. Leaving the park we stopped at a local pizza place for a snack and a nice beverage before driving back to our hotel. I tell you these details to tell you we had a long and full day. So we get back to the hotel, and I'm laying on the bed figuring out where to go to dinner, one leg crossed over the other, when I look down at my foot and realize the entire heel of my sock, as well as most of the part covering the ball of my foot, is missing. All the sock above my shoe looks great, and there's sock across the arch of my foot, as well as the top of my foot and the toes. But anywhere my foot meets the ground, it's just foot. I hadn't noticed when I put the sock on that morning, nor had I noticed at any point during the day. It was only that evening, looking at my bare heel, that I realized I had really spent the entire day in the illusion of socks. It looked like I was wearing socks, when really I just had on ankle warmers that latched over my toes.

I saw that sock and thought, "sock, I relate to you." Because I felt a bit like that sock. I was giving off the illusion of functioning. You would look at me and see a person going to work

every day, training for a marathon, spending time with friends, keeping my house more or less in order. But the reality was I was doing the surface level of those things. Peek inside the shoe, and there was nothing covering the heel. I was wearing those things for structure, rather than providing the structure myself.

Friends, I share my sad sock tale with you to tell you one of the things that's changed for me over the course of these last six weeks, is that I think I've had my concept of grace wrong for years. Or, not wrong exactly, but too narrow. Before, I would have told you that we cannot earn grace, faith, salvation, the love of God, whatever, on our own. We can't. Our mortal, sinful, human selves simply cannot earn the incredible love of God. Grace is a God who comes to us and gives us what we can never deserve. What I have now come to believe is that grace meets us even before that. Grace is a not God who gives us what we cannot do for ourselves, but a God who meets us before we need, so that we do not have to do the work alone. Grace isn't God saying, you can't do this, let me help you. Grace is a God saying, maybe you can do it, maybe you can't. Your ability in this situation is irrelevant, because here I am alongside you in the trying.

I was thinking about my sock in relation to our Gospel text for this morning, about how my sock is a bit of hypocrite. Now before you get on me for being so critical of my poor sock, it's not it's fault I wore a hole in the heel, let's do some defining. It is only recently, and by recently I mean in the history of words, so like, eight-hundred years ago, that hypocrite took on the meaning we know, that of someone who puts on a false virtuous face while really being a jerk. In Greek, hypocrite literally translates to "interpreter from underneath"

and it was a term used for actors in Greek tragedies. In ancient Greek theater, performers would wear masks so they could perform a lot of different roles on stage. The audience would see the mask, while behind the mask an actor was interpreting the role. In the ancient Greek actor sense, my sock was a hypocrite. It was to all the world performing as a sock, even meeting most of the basic sock functions to the point where I the wearer of the sock did not notice it's deficiencies, while absolutely not having it together around the heel area. And I wonder when in our text today Jesus told the people, "don't be like the hypocrites," if it was an invitation to not work so hard to look together. To be the sort of people who can be real, authentic, and vulnerable, who can ask for, and receive, help. If that, in fact, is grace. A God who says, yeah, you're doing that. But you seem to be working awfully hard at that to not accomplish very much. So, maybe you don't have to work so hard in the doing. Maybe this is a job that is a lot for you to handle, and it's ok to invite others into the carrying.

And here's where the sock metaphor breaks down a little bit, but maybe this passage, maybe the disciple of lent, maybe grace, is a new sock. Because the work still needs to get done. That's where how I used to see grace always sort of failed me. The work needs to get done, and if I just sit back and don't do it, that's frustrating. And also, like my sock, my trying something is better than nothing happening at all. Right, I know you all feel me here, you all are worker bees, it's one of the reasons we get along so well. None of you are just going to sit back and be like, I can't do this, it's hard. You're going to go, you're going to work, you're going to try. You too are my overworked sock. And grace, I'm coming to believe, isn't that you can't do it, grace is getting help in the doing. Grace is many hands

make light work. Grace is “my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Grace is companions along the journey.

I’ve probably shared this story with you before, but when I was working at the homeless shelter in DC, I stopped following all news. This was 2005, so there was news. It was Katrina, we were at war in Iraq, there was immigration concerns, you know, stuff. But I was twenty-two years old and the grief of the homeless women I worked with day in and day out was all I could emotionally carry. So I decided for a season I was only going to focus my attention on that one thing. I did that, I was able to do that, because I had housemates who were focused on other concerns. I had a housemate working for Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services on comprehensive immigration reform, I had a housemate caring for formerly homeless men dying of aids, I had a housemate advocating for justice in Columbia, I had one doing domestic violence education in local schools. I trusted them to do their work, to carry their portion, and I did mine.

My new sock offer for you this lent is two-fold. One, there are a million and one pressing and absolutely dire issues for you to care about, and just as many voices calling for your attention. Pick one. Pick one and care about that. Because you care about immigration or the environment or gun control or, let’s get even more hyper-local. Maybe you’ve got a friend or a neighbor or a loved one and they alone are all you have the time and space and energy for, picking one thing and being hyper-focused on that one thing does not mean that other things don’t matter, it just means that we only have the emotional capacity to do so much. Pick one, and trust others to carry their portion.

And two, let others help. This is me preaching to my own choir here, but let others help. And don't just let them, invite them. Here's something I've known about you all for years, and I haven't quite figured out how to navigate it as a leader, so I'm just going to tell you. Any one of you will do anything for each other, but none of you will volunteer without a direct ask. If I asked any one of you, directly and by name, will you do X, it's done, no questions asked. But if I put out a blanket statement, I need help with X, who wants to volunteer, crickets. It's not that this congregation is lazy, far from it, it's that you're all so conscientious that you don't want to step on anyone else's toes. Maybe you learned this on your own over the last six weeks, but let me spell it out for you just in case. Ask directly, people like being asked. And, and this is the harder part, take it when it's offered. Even if you think you don't need it, take it anyway, because grace is yes you can do that on your own, but you don't have to.

Grace, dear people of God, is like a good pair of socks. Yes, socks with holes will get the job done, but grace is a God for whom just getting the job done is not enough. Grace is support and comfort, warmth, and breathability. Grace is a really good pair of socks. Amen.