

SHOES

In May, 2003, while trying to identify my neurological problem, the doctor told me I would have to wear a brace on my weak right leg. This device started under my foot and went up to my calf, and brought with it a problem: I would need new shoes that would accommodate the brace. Fortunately there was a store in the area that specialized in the kind of shoes I would need. "These soles are made of material that will not slip or grip," the clerk said. "We sell a lot of these shoes to women in nursing homes." They looked like a combination of good sneakers and the sturdy oxfords my grandmother wore when I was a child.

I didn't know what to think. At seventy, was I ready to limit myself to this kind of shoe? I myself was a grandmother eleven times over, but styles had changed through the years. Eventually safety and comfort won out and I bought two very expensive pairs of leather shoes, one black and one white. Later, I added a pair of beige shoes to my collection. After a second neurologist said I didn't need to use the brace, I was relieved to find that my shoes were fine for regular wear. They did feel safe and they certainly were comfortable.

But in my closet were at least two dozen other pairs of shoes that I had collected through the years, ranging from sneakers to dress shoes in my favorite colors. Would I ever wear them again? After I was diagnosed with PLS, I knew that I would not, yet I found it amazingly hard to donate my shoes to Goodwill when we were packing to move to Drum Hill.

I like to think I accept reality pretty well and reality, as far as my footwear is concerned, is that in my closet now are only three pairs of shoes: black, white and beige. One Sunday several months after our move, I wore a brown velour dress to church with the dressiest stockings I had and my beige shoes. I had come to terms with wearing my shoes with slacks, but this was a test for me: sporty, "grandmotherly" shoes with a dress. I got back to Drum Hill in time for brunch, thinking my clothing experiment to be quite a success.

At my table is an eighty-nine year old woman with a terrible memory problem. Mabel's comments are mostly about what she sees or experiences at the moment: "That woman always wears the same style dress"; "I'm so thirsty!"; "I wonder where she gets her hair done"; "I have to file my nails soon," etc. Brunch over, she and I got up to return to our apartments, I with my walker and she with her cane, strolling at my side. "Those shoes don't go with that dress," Mabel said. I was taken aback. "Why?" I asked. "They're not dressy enough," she replied. "Well, they're the only style shoes I'm allowed to wear." "Oh. I didn't know," Mabel said.

And that was that – for Mabel. But I was totally deflated. So much for the success of my experiment! I tried to reason with myself: Why in the world would I get upset by a comment from Mabel? I knew then, of course, that I was still mourning the loss of my shoes. God was using Mabel to call my attention to an area where I needed more work. Thank you, Lord, for caring enough to want to refine my rough edges and make me more like you.

There are several Bible stories involving sandals (to me, synonymous with shoes) that have really influenced my thinking through the years. The first one concerns Moses at the burning bush, found in Exodus 3:1-5:

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush

does not burn up.” When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am, Lord.” “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

When the shepherd obeyed, God revealed his identity to Moses as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, as well as by the name I AM WHO I AM. That established, God then commissioned Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

The second story is found in Joshua 5:13-15 and concerns Joshua, the successor to Moses, who was about to lead the first battle in the Promised Land, the battle of Jericho.

Now when Joshua was near Jericho he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?” “Neither,” he replied, “but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.” Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence, and asked him, “What message does my Lord have for his servant?” The commander of the Lord’s army replied, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.

In this case God is identified as the commander of the Lord’s army, who had come not to take sides but to take over! After Joshua was face down in reverence and shoeless before God, the Lord gave him detailed instructions for fighting the battle of Jericho, which was a great victory for the Israelites.

I believe these literal incidents of removing sandals have to do with a submissive attitude that we should take in the presence of God, whether we have shoes on our feet or not. Some years ago I wrote a poem based on the above stories that expresses this thought:

In my heart, Lord, I’m down on my knees
Bowing in reverence before you.
Your love amazes me!
O Lord, my God, I adore you.

In my heart, Lord, I’m wearing no shoes –
Standing on holy ground, Lord,
Willing to do your will.
May your glory be found all around, Lord.

Let’s keep our proper position before our holy God. Who knows what assignment God may have in store for the truly humble?

* * * * *

This leads me to another story, that of the most humble man I know: John the Baptist. The definition of humility that I like is “believing no more or no less of yourself than what is true.” John the Baptist, a cousin of Jesus, started his public ministry six months before Jesus began his. In the first chapter of his gospel, the Jews of Jerusalem were questioning John, trying to determine his identity. No, he said, I am not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet. But he did claim to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy: *“I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”* John knew exactly who he was and who he was not: no identity crisis for him!

Now listen to what John said about Jesus: *“Among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie” (John 1:26,27).* Not worthy to UNTIE his sandals! I have spent time trying to figure out what that means and still I do not know. I can imagine the Lord’s servants scrambling, fighting for the privilege of tying or untying his sandals, but to stand back and say “I am not worthy of that privilege”? John, you have much to teach me!

* * * * *

Or ... wait! Are the attitude of unworthiness for serving Jesus and the desire to do anything we can for him perhaps two sides of the same coin? So many Bible teachings are that way: two teachings that may seem contradictory, yet both needed to keep us in balance. More than once Jesus used the foot washing custom of the time to illustrate truths. As a courteous sign of welcome back then, as I understand it, someone would meet those entering the house, remove their sandals and wash the dust of the road off their feet.

Once Jesus went to a dinner party at the home of a Pharisee named Simon, who neglected to show the usual signs of welcome to his honored guest. As Jesus was eating, a woman known for her sinful lifestyle entered the room, *“and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.”*

To Simon, who thought Jesus should not have allowed such a sinful person to touch his feet, Jesus gave a scathing reply:

“Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But those who have been forgiven little love little.”

This woman, whose story is told in Luke 7:36-50, also has much to teach us. Her humility is strong, just like John the Baptist's, but expressed in a different way. She and John both illustrate James 3:10: *“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”*

When no one performed the foot washing service at the Last Supper, Jesus himself took the place of a servant and used his washing the feet of his disciples as a superb teaching moment. He said to them (and to us):

“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:13-17).

Let's scramble for the privilege of serving one another, whether or not our service involves removing shoes and washing feet, remembering what Jesus said in Matthew 25:40:

“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

The morning after the incident with Mabel, still feeling uneasy, I began flipping through the newspaper when a startling picture caught my eye. There was a beautiful young woman in a black evening gown and a sheer shawl, carrying a handbag in one hand, and with the other, using a cane. Visible under the long dress were white sneakers! Clearly, she needed those shoes due to an injury she had suffered. The woman's lovely smile showed no sign of self-consciousness at all!

I had to laugh. I thought: “This is not a coincidence, is it, Lord?” and I felt the Lord chuckle with me. There was no condemnation, just a reassuring intimacy. God knows me so well! How silly of me to be embarrassed about my shoes!

We've all heard the proverb, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." Well, people are not dogs. We can learn and change as long as we have breath. I cut from the newspaper the picture of the smiling young woman and every time I see it I am reminded of the day I learned afresh that I still have much to learn! I am far from the "everything" mentioned by my mentor Paul:

"Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (Philippians 3:7,8).

© November, 2004
Verna Kwiatkowski

www.vernakwiatkowski.com