
Wipe the Dust Off of Your Feet

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Proper 9 – Year C**

When I was a young lawyer many years ago, I started my practice in an old building downtown. Now this was not the glory that I had envisioned when I went to law school. I had an interior office with no window. The carpet was worn. The furniture was bare. The paint seemed to be all but peeling off the walls. It was hot in the summer. It was cold in the winter. And the night watchman had a habit of just appearing in your doorway late at night. It was, in a word, inhospitable. Finally, after three or four years of this torture, we got word that we were moving. I could never have been happier. But on the day that we were supposed to move, as I was frantically trying to get all of my things ready, I got a call from a client. He just wanted to check on me. He just wanted to make sure that I was okay because he knew that I was going to miss this building in which I had spent so much time.

"Oh no," I said. "I am leaving this place. I am knocking the dust off of my feet. I am not looking back." He laughed. I laughed. That's exactly what I did. Now this phrase, "knocking the dust off of your feet," comes from our gospel today in Luke. But it's also in Matthew. It's also in Mark. In fact, it appears in the 13th chapter of Acts. It's something that the disciples were instructed to do and, in fact, did. We're told that it was the equivalent of cursing the town. If the people have rejected you, simply go into the street and curse them.

I'm not sure that's what Jesus really meant. This is the same Jesus who refused to let James and John pretend they were Elijah and bring down fire on people who were healing in Jesus' name, but not tutored, as it were, by Jesus. This is the same Jesus who advised the disciples not to judge lest they be judged, knowing that every judgment is, in fact, a self-judgment. I don't think Jesus intended for the disciples to curse those who are inhospitable. I think he intended to give them another way to register their protest, their reaction.

Now, why would he do this? I think Jesus did it because he was psychologically astute and he knew that his disciples, like me, might have a tendency to make up bad stories about people who rejected them. Or go into the next town talking about how bad the people in the last town were. Or, make up stories about how they could've been better. If they had just phrased it in a sports analogy, it would've been fine. Or just be angry and resentful and feel abandoned and alone.

I manage to have all of these feelings at the same time. Maybe the disciples had some experience of that as well. Jesus wanted the disciples to be present. When you see the instructions he gave them for people who invited them into their home, this seems obvious. Don't take sandals and a cloak, no extra stuff. Go into the first house that invites you in, stay there. Don't shop around for a better meal. Eat whatever they serve to you. Forget your diet. Be available, be dependent, be connected. Be in relationship.

The open heart of the messenger is critical to the message. You can't preach peace and love if you're not peaceful and loving. It just doesn't work. In that vein I think you can see the value of this practice, shaking the dust off of your feet. It's a way to be who you are and let what happened happen. Not to be attached to whether people like you or not. And move on and try to be present to the next person, knowing that you are the vehicle for God's love and peace. You are the vehicle for God's light and joy, but only if you have an open heart. It's a heart business.

Now you may be aware that we have a holiday coming up. It's July the 4th, the day on which we will celebrate our independence. The ideals of freedom that have guided this country. Now in preparing for tomorrow, I can hear the soaring rhetoric of our founders and many other great leaders. Abraham Lincoln, reminding us of the

importance of the bonds of our affection, calling us to yield to the better angels of our nature. John F. Kennedy reminding us not to ask what our country can do for us, but what we can do for our country. Ronald Reagan constantly giving us the image of the shining city on the hill, which he hoped we would become. Martin Luther King with a dream. James Baldwin telling us what love looks like and why it's important. Fannie Lou Hamer reminding us of the need for people to vote in order to be accepted.

There are more. Many more, but when I listen to that rhetoric and it's inspiring tones and language, what I'm remembering is that each of those leaders came about because there was another thing to be done. Another expansion of the circle, to include another group that had not been included before. They were all seemingly motivated by a vision that hadn't even seemed imaginable to the generation before. I suspect that's been the great lesson of our country. The heart work that supports our democracy, that lets us constantly draw that circle wider.

When I was in high school I was on the wrestling team. And I remember my junior year going to a tournament and just before my match learning that the opponent was blind. Now the rules for wrestling a blind opponent are relatively simple, it's all the same, except you cannot lose contact. You must be touching at all times. This was a strange situation and he felt a lot like an "other" when we started. And yet over the course of that match, there's a certain amount of connectedness, even intimacy that develops. While we strongly disagreed about who should win... I should say I don't even remember who won, which probably means I lost. Nevertheless, when it was over, there was an honor that I felt, a pride and privilege that I experienced just for having been in this unique moment, connected while fighting.

Connected while fighting, it was in a way its own heart work. It was in a way a dusting of my feet, a wiping off. It was hospitable. So as you prepare for your celebration tomorrow, I invite you too to think about this practice. This idea of shaking the dust off of your feet. The negative emotions that you feel, the anger that you may be experiencing. Just for a moment, forget about the Supreme Court, or Congress, or the state legislature or any number of government agencies and the administrative officials that run them. Heart work leads to justice work, but wiping the dust off your feet might require putting that off a day, taking a Sabbath, in order to be reminded that the call of God, the instructions to the disciples was to have an open heart, to be available to all. Giving instructions on how to meet those who wanted to be with you and how to deal with those who did not. Leaving you openhearted because it is, at the end of the day, heart work which supports our democracy.

I mentioned the soaring rhetoric and I want to leave you with one thing Martin Luther King said, and one that he believed. Aristotle and Lincoln and Martin Luther King all said one thing, the best way to destroy your enemies is to make them your friends. That's heart work. In his speech, "I Have a Dream," do you remember his vision at the end? What did he want? He wanted his children to play with other children. He wanted them to be judged by their character, not the color of their skin. That's heart work. Work for us all to do. The first three words in our Constitution are "We the people." We the people, we are the ones who need to do the heart work. We are the ones that need to be openhearted to support the community that we're trying to build and live in. The community that respects the dignity of every human being.

So I leave you with a suggestion. Maybe your celebrations can include some version of wiping the dust off your feet so that you will be open-hearted enough to see the beauty of all of the faces around you. Amen.