

“Take Off Your Shoes”

Exodus 3:1-15

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Do you like going barefoot? I do. I think I'd prefer being barefoot to wearing shoes if I could be assured that I wouldn't hurt my feet or step on glass or stub my toes. In 2010, a man named Arthur Jones, a filmmaker from England, embarked on a year-long mission to live his life barefoot. Known as “Sole Man,” that's s-o-l-e, Jones spent the year traveling the world, walking through freezing snow in Norway and standing on hot pavement in Shanghai. He literally took off his shoes and engaged the ground, the world, in a way that most of us would not imagine possible. By all accounts, this seems extraordinary.

When you take off your shoes you become more aware of the world around you, you feel it in a different way. You become aware of what you're standing on, you can feel every rock, the grass, the sand between your toes, the coolness of the bathroom tile when you step outside the shower, or the carpet in the sanctuary, every surface.

Arthur Jones says, “It opens your eyes. You're suddenly in touch with everything around. And it feels like you're a little child discovering the world for the first time.”¹ And I would add to Jones' claim that we feel this because *all ground is holy*. The earth is teeming with energy. Scientists will tell you that much and for those of us in faith, we might see this energy as holy spirit. But for practical purposes we can't live our lives like Arthur Jones, some of us even need our shoes, because we have orthotics, or we need steel toed workboots for work or something. We have to live much of our life in the ordinary, the every day, where the bottoms of our feet are cut-off from the energy that is teeming below them.

1 Keat, Jim. *From Burning Bush to Boston Common. On Scripture, 2017*

When Moses is keeping the flocks of his father-in-law he sees a burning bush. How is it that this bush is burning and is not consumed? And it is there that he has his first encounter with God, only Moses cannot look upon him directly. And it is there that God tells him his name. A name so holy it is never to be spoken. But first he tells him “Moses, take off your shoes.” In the presence of the holy one cannot look directly upon the face of God, or utter his name, or approach God with shoes on. All these things are outward signs of our inner humility when encountering the holy, the extraordinary. But this is not how we ordinarily engage one another in the real world, in the Gull Prairie room or in the frozen food aisle of Hardings. We look at one another directly, we speak each other’s names and most of the time our shoes are on.

The scriptures say Moses is to take off his shoes because it is holy ground. It is kind of funny that we should take off our shoes to engage the holy. Bare feet are kind of odd. Have you ever looked at your feet? They're not the most attractive part of the body, are they? Some people get seriously weirded out by the sight of them.

But Moses is told to go barefoot because this is holy ground. And so he takes off his shoes.

Have you ever been to Japan? (Larry) That's a place I have yet to travel, but one pastor—Kara Suomala-- describes her trip to Japan, and one of the things she most notices is how many times she takes off her shoes. Entering a building, or a home, she takes off her shoes. Entering a temple, she takes off her shoes.

Suomala says, “Upon my return from Japan I decided to investigate this shoe business. Why do the Japanese take their shoes off, especially when they enter their homes or temples? I discovered that taking off one’s shoes is a fairly ancient custom in Japan, going back at least to

the 7th or 8th century, that it's widespread--98 percent of all Japanese do it--and that people have specific reasons for doing so.”

She goes on to say, that in one survey she read, “81 percent of the people identified not one, but two equally important reasons for taking their shoes off when they enter their homes: 1) to keep their houses and floors clean; and 2) to be able to relax and be themselves.”²

To relax and be themselves...

Like Suomala, we can ask ourselves “Is it possible that God tells Moses to take his shoes off because he wants Moses to be himself? To remove all pretense? To be vulnerable and open to what God has to say?”

When I took my shoes off with the kids this morning I felt vulnerable. What if my feet smelled? What if I had a hole in my sock? What if my toes are ugly? How embarrassing.

So—everybody take off your shoes! Not really, at least not literally.

But let's look at taking off our shoes as a metaphor. Taking off one's shoes—in a spiritual sense—is an outer sign of our inward state of being: with our shoes off we strive to be humble, worshipful and above all respectful—both to God and to one another. We approach each other with humility. We strive to be extraordinary.

In the ordinary, with our shoes on, we tend to be prideful, self-righteous and self-reliant; while in the ordinary with our shoes on we live by our ego and our insecurities; we are often selfish, angry, unkind. It is the ordinariness of everyday humanity which can be clumsy and detached from the holy.

2 Suomala, Kara. *Commentary on Exodus 3:1-5*. *WorkingPreacher.org*. September 17, 2017

But imagine taking those shoes off and feeling the holy. In the extraordinariness of the Christian fellowship, we take pride in others, our church, community. We can live out the extraordinary admonitions of Roman's 12, to "live in harmony with one another...and peaceably with all."

With our shoes off we can be our true selves, the ones that God created us to be. This is us, no shoes. And we're neither self-righteous or self-reliant because we admit that we are flawed beings, too often seduced by our own egos and we know we need one another to be extraordinary. We shed our old ways selfish ways, the anger we carry in our hearts and we take responsibility for our hurtful behavior and seek to be kind in all things.

Have you ever stood on holy ground? Where was it? Where is holy ground for you? What about here? Is this holy ground? Do we act differently because we are here? Maybe we don't take our shoes off, but maybe we speak differently. Maybe we use a softer voice. We discourage the kids from running. We avoid bringing our coffee or our snacks in here. But is there something special about this place, or is this holy because it is here that we meet with God? And therefore, since God is everywhere, couldn't anyplace be holy ground if that's where we meet God?

Of course it could, but this is truly holy ground because we do meet God here. Every week—in the scriptures, in the music, in prayer. We meet God here when we sit in the pews in silence. And don't we especially meet God here in one another. Every Sunday we take a moment and greet our neighbor. But we don't really greet them. We don't say, "Good morning, how are you?" That's the ordinary world. Instead, we say, "peace be with you." And we respond with the same words or we say, "and also with you." And we do that because part of our experience of God is in one another. Part of what makes this holy ground is that we are not here alone, but that we are here as God's children together. And we know that for this to be holy ground, we

have to act like it is. And so instead of actually taking off our shoes, we do in a spiritual sense, we open ourselves up to really be ourselves with one another, reach out our hands to each other. We become vulnerable with each other. But that's what must happen if we are to become the extraordinary community that God has called us to be. We know that as God has reconciled himself to us in Jesus Christ, we are to be as Christ to one another and reconcile ourselves to each other. Not with bare feet, but with a bare hand, with an embrace, with words of peace.

Here in this room, or when we get our coffee and we look around for that person standing alone. Or when we go into class and we listen for another's wisdom rather than thinking about what I want to say. Or when we go into a committee meeting and we remember that we are there to seek the mind of Christ, not just to advance our agenda. In a way, we have bare feet. And we become different.

When we reach out our hands for one another, when we look someone in the eye and say, Peace be with you, we are in touch with that other world, with holiness, with the Christlikeness that is in that person, and that is in you. And this becomes an extraordinary place. This becomes a holy place.