

## Shake off the Dust

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It was John Calvin who said, “God knows that we are creatures, and so loves us in ways that we can understand: In bread and wine and water.”

Jesus has given us sacraments, highly charged symbolic actions which are meeting places with God, which connect the material and spiritual.

Jesus gave us *Baptism*, washing in water, a sacrament of forgiveness and new birth. He gave us the *Lord’s Table*, bread and wine, a sacrament of God’s new relationship with us and our new relationship with one another. He gave us the *Laying on Of Hands*, the sacrament of the anointing of the Holy Spirit for ministry and healing. And he gave us *the Washing of Feet*, a sacrament of love that takes the form of a servant.

And, he gave us one more, what British theologian John Oman calls “the Forgotten Sacrament”: *the Shaking Off of the Dust*, which is a “sacrament of failure.”

Jesus sent his disciples out on mission and said, when people refuse to welcome you and the gospel you preach, refuse to offer you hospitality, shake the

dust off your feet and move on! So today's command of Christ: Shake Off The Dust.

## I

Jesus knew the hardest thing his disciples would face would be when they and their ministry were rejected. What do we do when we run into our limitations and the limitations of others, what happens when we do our best, and our best is not enough? When others are doing their best and their best is not enough? Sometimes our worst and theirs is involved too. And who can untangle the knot of responsibility.

So Jesus in his wisdom and mercy has given us this sacrament, the Shaking Off of the Dust, what John Oman has called A Sacrament of Failure. It is the acknowledgement that we have done all we can do, or should do, and it's time to let go and move one.

Sometimes we are tempted to move on too quickly. This is another sermon. The desert mothers and fathers advised "leave no place easily." There is wisdom there. But there are times when the most redemptive thing for you to do is to shake the dust off you feet and move on. We acknowledge the failure and move on to the future God has for us.

Someone has defined forgiveness as the *decision to stop trying to make the past different*. The past cannot be changed, only forgiven. Forgiveness in the New Testament means to *loose* or *let loose*. Forgive yourself and others, and move on. It's a way to free yourself from the hurts of the past. It is an act of self-compassion.

We can pretend that failure is not a failure. We can pound closed doors until our knuckles are bleeding and our hearts are past broken. We can let the dust, so fine we can hardly see it, cake our skin, til our skin can no longer breathe, and we can no longer breathe. Shake off the dust and move on.

I am thinking today of the end of a marriage, the end of a job, a failure in business, some bad fortune that has left you in bad shape. Shake off the dust and move on into the future God has for you. Jeremiah wrote to the Hebrews in captivity, God's words.

For I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not your harm, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

## II

Sometimes we find our most basic calling in the world, our vocation, being challenged and being changed by closed doors and by human failure.

A combination of your own limitations – and others- means you cannot be effective there any longer. A ministry has ended, a vocational chapter has closed. Shake off the dust and move one.

You may be certain that you were called by God to a certain path, but now that path bears no fruit. It has become a blind alley. Shake off the dust and move toward some new path.

Parker Palmer, a Quaker writer, tried as all good Quakers try to discern God's path for him. "Have faith", the Quakers say, "and way will open."

He met much frustration in "finding way", and he went to a Quaker saint and confessed his difficulty. She replied,

I am a birthright Friend, and in sixty plus years of living, way has never opened in front of me... But a lot of way has closed behind me, that's had the same guiding effect.

Closed doors can help us find our way. Shake off the dust and move on.

### III

In its most primitive forms the shaking off of the dust was a sacrament of judgment. It pronounced judgment on one's enemies, on those who rejected you. You shook the impure dust from your feet.

Jesus, I believe, was transforming a *sacrament of judgment* into a *sacrament of freedom* which offers both you and the other a new future.

Such an act entrusts both your life and the life of the other into better hands than yours. That is, into God's hands.

It is a declaration of freedom from co-dependent ministry and co-dependent loving- which I define as *trying to love people more than Jesus does*.

Carlyle Marney once said, "It was a freeing moment in my ministry when I realized I didn't have to be a blessing to everybody."

There are some people you will not be able to bless. And there are some people who, because of who they are, cannot bless you. We want to be a blessing to everyone; we want and need the blessing of others, but sometimes it is not in the cards. It cannot happen. Sometimes it is our limitation; sometimes it is the other's limitation. Sometimes the reasons are so deep and so complex that the giving and receiving of blessing was never a possibility, and the reasons cannot be fully known. I know that some parents tragically cannot bless their children. Perhaps they themselves were never blessed and had no blessing to pass on.

I am speaking of ministry here, and I am speaking of the most important of relationships, parent and child, the deepest of friendships, the failure of marriage and failure *in* marriage.

The shaking off of the Dust has been given to us as a sacrament of failure. It helps us acknowledge our failure. It gives us the grace to acknowledge that we can fail at something without being a failure. It gives us the grace to move on and stop clinging to our failure.

#### IV

The shaking off of the Dust also means that there are some methods by which the kingdom of God is not to be advanced. To quote a James Taylor song, “You just can’t kill for Jesus”. In the kingdom of God the *means* must be consistent with the *ends*. Indeed the ends are present *in* the means.

Some victories are not worth winning, for in winning we’ve lost our goals and our souls. For one, there can be not coercion in faith. Some methods of manipulation are not worthy of the kingdom of God. For another, the gospel of Christ cannot be advanced through the power of the State and the power of the sword, though at times the church has made this deadly bargain. The deal the Church made with Emperor Constantine to make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire came at a great spiritual cost. There are Christian leaders today who in attempts to advance their faith have sold their birthright for a mess of political pottage.

Love does not trample over the boundaries of our sacred personhood.

Neither does God. John Oman writes:

God has made in every heart a sanctuary into which only the persuasion of love has a right to enter, a sanctuary into which [God] will not force an entrance.

Jesus had a choice to make: to use human violence to advance the kingdom or to die at the hands of violence and stay true to his vision. In this Jesus teaches us how to fail. Jesus chose the failure which was victory and bore in his broken body the sign of the magnificent defeat. He could have won, in any number of wordly ways, and we lost, and faith and hope and love lost, but he lost—that we and all the world might win.

## V

There is a good reason to suspect that the disciples and the early church misunderstood Jesus' teaching on the Shaking Off of the Dust- that they thought it was still a sacrament of judgment.

Just verses later in Luke the disciples were refused hospitality by a Samaritan village on their way to Jerusalem.

Two of Jesus' disciples were James and John, nicknamed "Sons of Thunder". They were the self-appointed Secretary of Defense and Secretary of Labor in Jesus' Cabinet.

They returned to Jesus and said: This Samaritan village has refused us hospitality. Can we ask God to bring down fire and destroy them? Like Elijah did to the prophets of Baal? Like what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah? Can we Jesus?

And Jesus, the text says, turned and "rebuked" them. Some manuscripts add these words of Jesus:

You do not know the spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has come not to destroy lives but to save them.

This is the Spirit of Jesus and we are still trying to understand.

Meanwhile he has given us a sacrament of failure, The Shaking Off of the Dust, to help us when failure and rejection come our way. Do you feel the grace of it? I spoke of sacraments being *meeting places* with God. In this sacrament of the Shaking Off of the Dust, God meets us at the point of our rejection or failure and points us toward the future.