

Going Barefoot Year-Round



We went barefoot in church. It was Maundy Thursday, and our bishop took off his fancy robes, took a seat on a stool and invited each one of us to walk up to the chancel and sit in his chair so that he could wash our feet. Certainly it was moving, the bishop taking the place of a servant before us. But it was also rather comedic, seeing all of us traipsing barefoot through the nave. While others choked back emotion as an 80-something cleric hobbled unshod to sit before the bishop, I (risking reproach) chuckled under my breath, thinking this is the most freeing moment I've had in church in a very long time.

The sight of us barefoot in church returned me to the Alabama summers of my childhood. No self-respecting Alabama mother allowed her children to wear out their shoes during summer vacation. At most, she would pull down those shoes for church, and they would go right back on the shelf as soon as we returned from our perfunctory foray to Sunday school.

Our mother's determination that we would go barefoot through the summer illustrated her obedience to a higher purpose — that of absolute frugality in the home. We're relearning this in our families today. More importantly, our unshod feet represented our new freedom during the long days of June, July and August when we played outside from sunup to sundown. Those days seemed to stretch out forever. The tops of my feet would be tanned as brown as a berry, my soles would be as tough as rawhide, and I could step on stones and not wince.

These days I feel as if my life is tied up as tightly as the black oxfords on my feet. Like everyone else, I need times to be unbound. We all must return to the places where we once really felt the ground beneath our feet.

I think that need is what's behind the angel's breathless announcement to the women at the empty tomb:

Go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead," and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.

Matthew 28:7

The angel directs the disciples to return to where they first met Jesus; return to where they first fell in love with Jesus; return to where the days stretched out magically forever before them.

I squeeze the magic out of my life in the parish much like I squeeze my feet into black, shiny shoes. Before I know it, I am walking around like a dead man with little or nothing creative or restorative to offer the parish I serve. The people of the parish deserve better. I deserve better.

Sometimes I make myself return to those Maundy Thursday nights so many years ago, when Ethel Louise

Simmonds would decorate the Lady Chapel at St. Andrew's School in Sewanee like Gethsemane, replete with arched dogwood limbs, fragrant store-bought lilies, and the crocus and daffodils that had bravely pushed through the still-frozen ground of the quad. The priests and monks decided we would take turns staying awake through the night. We'd stumble to the chapel door in the early morning, knock, and call out in unison, "Christ humbled himself and became obedient unto death." And the tired voices from inside would respond, "Even unto death on the cross." We would then exchange places and kneel directly in front of the monstrance, illuminated on all sides by radiant flowers and candles.

By that time in my life, no parent was there to chide me into the Sunday school room or stick a hymn book in my hands. I was there alone, face to face with an awesome, holy God who had given all so that I could be set on fire with purpose that will never be extinguished.

James Agee, who knelt in that same place, describes the experience of Maundy Thursday for both of us:

He tried to breathe so quietly that he could not feel his chest go in and out or even any air moving in his nostrils, and he gazed studiously at the monstrance, visualizing through the veil the spangled sunlike gold and the white center, and upon that center Christ Crucified, Whom he saw at first in metal and then in wood and then in flesh ... (The Morning Watch, 1950)

So it's an escape, but also a fearful obligation to return to that time when I first met Jesus, where I first fell in love with him, and where the possibilities that flowed from my conversion extended as far and wide and free as a west Texas interstate highway.

Ironically, Moses couldn't get back on the road until he took off his shoes (Exodus 3:5). Once we do the same, we'll be back on holy ground again.

Our guest columnist is the Rev. Patrick Gahan, rector of St. Stephen's Church, Wimberley, Texas. This is the third in a series of personal reflections on the life of a priest.