

## GROUNDING SHOES

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Sunday, January 10, 2010

### SCRIPTURE

- **From the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 7 verses 24 – 27** - And Jesus said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like the wise person who built their house upon rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but the house did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like the foolish person who built their house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell – and great was its fall."

- **from Ecclesiastes 3:1-9 – from The Way of Solomon, by Rami Shapiro**

Life is fleeting, the passing of moments upon moments. Embrace them as they come; do not cling to them as they go. In this alone is there tranquility.

Moments of birth, moments of death;  
moments of planting, moments of uprooting;  
moments of killing, moments of healing;  
moments of knocking down; moments of building up;  
moments of mourning; moments of dancing;  
moments of casting stones; moments of gathering stones;  
moments of embracing; moments of departing;  
moments of seeking; moments of forsaking;  
moments of keeping; moments of discarding;  
moments of silence; moments of speech;  
moments of love; moments of hate;  
moments of war; moments of peace.

Moments and the passing of moments – this is life. Live the moment; attend to the doing; accept whatever comes into your hand. In this only is the path.

**SERMON** - Each spring, before the ministers gather to set the worship theme for the coming year, we ask for suggestions from the congregation. Last year, Linda Spence sent in this idea: "Flipflops, loafers and workboots – How's your footing?" And we thought – Wow! That's interesting. Good images and a good question. So during the next five Sundays, in various ways, we will look at our footing, using shoes as our visual and metaphorical symbols for the ways we walk through our days, our lives, our faith. And speaking of symbols, aren't the shoes all around the Sanctuary wonderful, including the shoes on our bulletin cover! Thanks to Barbara Beynon, Lilliam Pancorbo, Susan James, Peggy Mixon, Mike Myers – all members of our Visual Arts team – and Ken Bradley – for their work in making this theme come alive before our eyes.

I asked Betsy to share the fairy tale about the Elves and the Shoemaker today, because it illustrates the symbolism of shoes. Now we all know that every fairy tale begins with the same four words – "Once upon a time" – and every fairy tale ends with some version of "happily ever after." While children's fairy tales are the most common, there are a number of adult fairy tales of which this is one. The shoemaker and his

wife are adults, fallen on hard times, things going from bad to worse, the magic of youth gone from their lives. Miraculously, elves (and what better symbol of magic could there be?) appear at night and make shoes that allow the shoemaker and his wife to prosper. In the process, the magic comes back into their lives, they are very grateful, and we are told, they are practical people who start working once again. By their practice and hard work, they make shoes as beautiful as the elves had done, and they live happily for the rest of their days.

Shoes are mundane, every day, mostly taken for granted things, and herein lies their importance. In fairy tales, shoes always represent something about grounding, the ability to be centered, to accomplish what needs to be done. So the shoes in this shoemaker's fairy tale symbolize that in adulthood, grounding comes from the everyday and the essential, from the close to the earth, feet on the ground, parts of life – and in finding and accepting that grounding, the magic of life can be rediscovered in adulthood.

In another adult fairy tale, "The Golden Tree", the King foolishly banishes his Queen because she does not live up to his expectations. He discovers then that he is lost without her and he sets off on a quest, which becomes a spiritual quest, as the Queen can only be found if the King first reaches the Golden Tree, the source of wisdom. An old hermit gives the King directions and also gives the King his shoes, shoes that will enable the King to survive as he crosses the boiling hot stream that surrounds this sacred Golden tree. Through these shoes, the story gently reminds us of the importance of remaining grounded on our personal and spiritual quests, lest we be badly burned. If you'd like to know more about these adult fairy tales, I recommend the book, Once Upon a Midlife, by Allan Chinen.

These are my tap shoes. When I began tap lessons at age three, I had those little shiny black patent leather tap shoes with ribbons that tied in a big bow. I remember being about 12 and longing for these grown-up tap shoes with real heels and, my friends, with double click taps. Dancing was the creative spark throughout my growing up. It both grounded my life and also allowed me to leap and smile and sparkle. Even when I hung up my tap shoes after high school, I still loved to dance and I still felt that sense of flexible grace in my body. UCG proved to be the place where I could, on special occasions, put on these tap shoes again.

In the last couple of years, however, I've felt my body become stiffer, less flexible, and my genetic predisposition to osteoporosis has been a growing concern. So this fall, my doctor sent me for physical therapy. I put it off for a couple months, because all I could imagine was being pushed until it hurt. My friend David Reiser used to say: Do you know the only difference between physical therapy and medieval torture? Chrome."

However that has not been the case. And what my physical therapist has been teaching me meshes precisely with what we're talking about today. She's helping me find my physical footing and flexibility by balancing my body on the foundation of my feet lined up with my knees lined up with my hips and shoulders and neck and head. And getting that foundation in place, getting my feet and my knees and my hips

grounded and the muscles strengthened, means that my flexibility is also increasing daily. Finding that grounding and balance has already changed my physical well-being.

Dancers live, breathe and move with a constant awareness of their footing. Each type of dance requires a different kind of shoes, or no shoes, and a particular kind of challenge for balance. I've asked Jenny Hill, who has been dancing her whole life, to share with us a few elemental tips about how a dancer keeps her footing.

*Jenny - When you think of dancers performing, you probably think of graceful, weightless, flying movement, bodies soaring through the air and defying gravity. But one of the very first things you learn as a dancer is that every leap and jump begins and ends with a plie, bending your legs upon solid, grounded feet. (illustrate). You must first connect with the ground. You have to find your balance, footing and stability before you leap. And you always return to that stable, grounded place when you come out of the leap. (illustrate)*

*If you jump from a straight leg, without any preparation or grounding, you won't go anywhere (illustrate). If you try to come down from a leap without bending your legs and grounding yourself, you are asking for serious injury. (illustrate). If you watch any of the dance reality shows on TV, you may have heard the judges get very excited when a dancer is really "grounded". That's because this relationship with the earth is so essential to strong dancing and exciting, risky movement.*

*Another element of dance that is so exciting to watch, and to do, is turning: pirouettes on one leg, turns across the floor. What we see are the legs and arms spinning through the air, the balancing act on one set of toes, but the source of a strong balanced turn is a strong centered core. Young dancers learn "tummys in," but what this really means is that you have to be strong in your center, you have to lift from within, so that you can find that balance and safely extend your arms and legs, safely spin and turn, knowing that your center will allow you to come out of the turn and back to two solid grounded feet. (illustrate)*

*You also have to learn to spot as a dancer, which means finding a point of focus amidst all of that turning. You find a still, clear place on the wall ahead of you, in the directing where you want to be when you finish turning. You lock your gaze on that spot and you hold that focus until you absolutely have to let go. Then you immediately find that spot of focus again, repeating this over and over. That spotting, that point of focus, keeps you from becoming horribly dizzy and allows you to keep right on dancing when the turn is over. (illustrate)*

*Finally, one of the greatest things a dance teacher ever taught me is that, although we get so caught up in perfecting the positions, dancing is not about hitting the positions, it's not about the grand poses that your choreographer designs for you and asks you to hold: it's about the moments of transition in between, when you are off balance, when you are in transition, when you think you aren't doing anything important or interesting. When you forget about those moments in between – the running, the sliding, the moving from point a to point b, you lose the greatest potential of the dance. The safe, grounded moments are essential, but to be fully present, to experience the dance fully, you have to be off balance, savor the transitions, remember*

*to feel each movement as you travel from one place on the stage to the next. The greatest dancers – Barischnykov, Martha Graham – did this every time they performed and you couldn't take your eyes off of them. You often remember a tiny, small beautiful gesture or movement in their dances between the grand poses, because they were so alive and present at that time, not rushing to the next big moment in the dance. (Illustrate all of the movements and positions from above, joining them together as a beautiful dance sequence.)*

Thank you Jenny! As Jenny illustrated so beautifully, whether we're dancing or walking, whether we're in flipflops, loafers or workboots, our footing, both literally and metaphorically, depends on two things: being grounded and being flexible. We have to have that foundation, that grounded position, in order not to fall over, in order not to be injured, or as the King in the fairy tale, in order not to get burned. And we then need flexibility in order not to remain rigidly implanted in place, wedged and trapped.

Life is a constant two-step dance from a moment of grounding to a moment of flexibility back to a moment of grounding. We've all seen people in times of change or transition who get stuck in one place and cannot move. And we've all seen people in times of change or transition who fly off with no foresight like dandelion wisps in the wind as we wonder when and where and how they will ever land again. In life, especially in times of change and transition, we have to be able to bear the tension of those opposites: of one part of us staying rooted and strong in place, while the other part of us reaches out toward what is new, what is coming next, what allows us to soar.

When our UCG Compact calls us "to learn from our religious heritage and to grow by seeking new dimensions of truth," it is reminding us about this essential balance for our spiritual footing. Anchor your faith, says Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, upon a foundation built of rock, a foundation that can steady you, hold you up in the rain and the wind, in the seasons and the cycles of life. Live your life, says Ecclesiastes, in the passing of moments upon moments, with flexibility as you move from mourning to dancing, from embracing to departing, from tearing down to building up.

The faith journey is always that awkward walk: one foot planted in the foundation of our faith and the other foot constantly moving to deal with the realities of our lives and of this earth. It's a clumsy journey, ripe with tension, but it is the way to walk the spiritual path. The balance comes by using both feet.

If I were your spiritual dancing teacher right now, trained as a disciple of two great dancers, Jesus and the one known only as "The Preacher" who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, I would send you home from today's session with this question, how's your footing on this 10<sup>th</sup> day of 2010? How's your physical footing as you go through your days? How's your footing in the various parts of your life: your relationships, your work and your avocations, your service to others? How's your spiritual footing – the path you are on, the spiritual practices that nurture you? Then I would give you these three reminders.

First, from Jesus, remember your foundation. Find your grounding, the underpinning that holds you and sustains you through all the highs and lows, the

comings and goings of your life. Find it with your feet and your heart and find it with your soul.

Second, from the Preacher's book Ecclesiastes, remember the turning, spinning, beauty of transition and change, of being in the air as you stretch your life, your dreams, and as you shift from moment to moment with flexibility and grace, in your best life dancing shoes.

And third, remember to keep your knees, your muscles, and your soul flexed, so that you can bounce comfortably when you land – or when you decide to do a little happy dance!

Let us join in prayer:

Psalm 17 begins with these words -

*Lord, listen to my prayer; hear me in the hour of my need.*

*Guide my feet on your path; don't let me stop or falter.*

And so we too pray this morning that You, O Holy One, will guide our feet on your path; that Your strength will be the foundation under our feet.

We pray for our hopes and dreams – our vision of our future – and for the transitions in our lives now and in the near future. May we walk, may we dance, into our future on solid ground and on soaring wings– with that uneven two-step that is the journey of faith.

In unopened gifts of promise, in unexpected surgings of new life, in the shining of your everlasting light, may we find your presence, O God, before us, around us and within us. Blessed be. Amen.