

Barefoot theology

What do you think of when you hear the word “barefoot?”

(gather some responses: naked, vulnerable, smelly, nice feeling, ...)

When I was growing up, I loved walking barefoot. I walked everywhere barefoot, especially to our public swimming pool, even though it meant walking over about a quarter of a mile of gravel. By the beginning of the summer it hurt, but by the end I had thick callouses. I even went to school barefoot a number of times and only realized it when others commented, and the teacher couldn't quite decide whether to send me home to get shoes or not.

But when I went to Paraguay in 2009 to attend high school for half a year and learn Spanish, people kept telling me I shouldn't walk barefoot. I didn't quite get why they were so insistent on this, and so I wore shoes most of the time, but around the house I still walked barefoot. Until one day, I woke up and had this weird pain in my feet. Turns out I had become a host to a kind of flea, *tunga penetrans*, that reproduces by laying its eggs into the feet of humans and animals, thus providing a safe environment for their young, and even food when they hatch! My host parents knew what to do and immediately started cutting open my feet and pulling out the eggs with little pincers. It was very painful and I decided to wear shoes all the time while in Paraguay. I still like to walk barefoot, but I watch the ground closer, and also research whether stuff like this exists in the places I go to.

I am opening with this somewhat gross story, because this sermon is about walking barefoot, and while I find a lot of good things in walking barefoot, I wanted to avoid the romanticizing that often accompanies it. What is it that makes walking barefoot a necessary corrective to our way of life? What makes walking barefoot a counter-script to the imperial script?

First a counterscript I am not exploring too much:

As I was preparing this sermon, I listened to a talk by my mentor, Anabaptist theologian Ched Myers as part of a conference on Indigenous Justice and Christian Faith. I thought about just playing it instead of doing my own sermon. And while I ultimately decided against that, I highly recommend his talk to you and already sent a link to Malinda to be included in the online newsletter.

For Ched, this text describes “the road not taken” by Christian mission. With fatal results for indigenous peoples in this country and around the world.

Instead of following Jesus’ exhortation to take nothing with us, we have brought all our baggage with us and tried to remake people in our own image. Instead of being dependent on host communities to receive us, we have chosen dominance and all too often made whole communities dependent on us, through development, instead of sharing good news and healing the sick, Christian mission all too often brought disease for the body and toxic theology that poisoned the soul. Bad news all around.

In terms of our theme this year this text is the counterscript to the script of colonial mission that has so formed and malformed the world we live in. The colonization of the Americas, the enslavement of Africans, and the cultural genocide of indigenous peoples would not have happened, at least not in this way, had the church been faithful to Jesus’ command to practice vulnerable mission.

But this script of colonial mission has not only been fatal to others, but fatal results for ourselves, denigrating our humanity and tricking us into accepting pie in the sky when you die as opposed to the fullness of life here and now and beyond this life that Jesus offered.

As we look at this mess, it’s important to remember that the colonization in the name of Jesus would not have been possible without the prior colonization of Jesus. (as Ched says in his talk, and as we have also learned from Willis Jennings) Before Christians started colonizing other countries, they colonized Jesus by uprooting him from his Jewish context, and nailing his message down to a substitutionary death on the cross, making sure he won’t ever talk back to us or unsettle us.

But the good news is that Jesus won’t stay dead, and continues to talk back to us, we just need to listen and risk being unsettled.

As I was preparing this sermon one phrase stuck in my head: “no sandals.” I was imagining the disciples walking barefoot, and the image connected to three points in my head

In the beginning, in the garden, Adam and Eve are naked, and presumably barefoot. And they think nothing of it, living in perfect intimacy with God and with each other! Only after they break that intimacy of trust by going against God’s command do they notice their nakedness and cover themselves, imperfectly, with leaves. When God asks them to leave the garden, she recognizes that

their nakedness exposes them to potential harm and fashions them clothes out of animal skins, presumably killing other beloved creatures in the process (Genesis 3:21)

What we have here is a mythological reflection, philosophy in the form of a story, on vulnerability as the human condition.

I like to take words apart, to see what they mean. Vulnerability, for example, comes from vulnera and abilitas, two latin words meaning wound and ability, it's our wound-ability, the ability to be wounded. Doesn't sound too great, does it? But if you think about it, there really isn't a way around our wound-ability.

Since we are bodies, we are exposed to others who can hurt us, just as we can hurt them. This fundamental vulnerability prompts us to seek to cover ourselves and ensure we will not be wounded, even when that covering is at the expense of others. Like the animals in Genesis 3.

A little further along in the story of Genesis we hear Cain reflecting on his vulnerability as an outcast from human society for killing his brother Abel. And while God promises to protect him and avenge his death, this is not enough for Cain who becomes the first to build a wall to keep out all dangers, real and imagined.

Today, we live most our lives inside walls attempting to cover over our vulnerabilities. One of the things I learned from living with Thomas was what a privilege it was to be able to go to your room when you are having a tough time.

And while the building of walls might bring a community together in the short run, over time one finds oneself trapped. And while we may hide our vulnerabilities, no one is able to keep their guard up indefinitely.

We pretend to be strong by denying our vulnerability, but really, when we do so we try to deny what it means to be human. And no matter how hard we try not to be human, we ultimately always fail. It is imperative that we learn to embrace vulnerability, while also protecting bodies from harm.

A second meaning of vulnerability is thus the ability to allow ourselves to be vulnerable by letting down whatever guards we have built up to escape being wounded. This second meaning is inherently communal, it is about creating space for vulnerability and its relatives, honesty and grace. Interestingly, showing vulnerability is often what enables others to reciprocate and let their own guard down. Rituals like footwashing, or communion, can create designated times and spaces for vulnerable sharing and slowly transform the culture through performative acts. Leaders can also foster vulnerability in community through modeling.

intimacy and holiness

risking vulnerability, receiving hospitality

vulnerability as resilience

in the face of collapse

vulnerability

c) Resilience

diversity of elements

multiplicity of connections -

modularity – even if some fail, the overall system can still function.

Resilience refers to the ability of a system to keep working under pressure, or spring back after stress. It is a concept that is used in a variety of disciplines, most prominently in ecology and psychology. The multiple and compounding global ecological economic, social, and spiritual crises already put society, soil, and the individual soul under tremendous stress. This dynamic is likely to continue as crises escalate, making the quest for resilience in all areas and at all scales vital.

Building local resilience is at the heart of the Transition movement, which originated in the British Isles in the early 2000s and has since spread around the world. It is a vision for a post-carbon future with increased quality of life by reinvigorating local community, a scale between the consumerist focus on the individual and the hopelessly abstract global focus of many campaigns. The focus on local resilience deeply resonates with the concept of subsidiarity in Catholic Social Teaching which states that needs should be met at the lowest possible level. There are a number of further similarities with the Catholic Worker movement including the emphasis on a positive vision.

d) Vulnerability makes resilient

One dynamic I keep thinking about is between resilience and vulnerability. Slippery use of language makes them seem opposed, such as when we talk about the vulnerabilities of a system that make it less resilient. But the opposite of resilience is not vulnerability—at least not in the sense of our fundamental being-exposed to others. I propose we call the opposite of resilience fragility. Fragility often stems from rigidity, the inability to adapt under pressure. By contrast, resilience is often illustrated by pointing to trees that bend within a storm rather than breaking.

Disability studies scholar Stacy Clifford Simplican argues that “Communities of vulnerability” which embrace vulnerability as a central part of what it means to be human are able to care for each other and are ultimately more resilient than “communities of strength” which center on strength and their professed superiority over others. Embracing vulnerability is not only morally good, but also strategically vital for communities confronting serious challenges in order to not crumble under the psychological, economic, and political pressures of crisis and potential repression.

resilience

we are in a time of shrinkage, maybe even collapse

The themes I want to work on is embracing vulnerability as the human condition and as a viable strategy for communal resilience.

here's some scribbles:

Jesus sends the disciples to preach and heal, a powerful message, but he sends them vulnerably, rather than self-sufficient, and dependent on hoped for hospitality and sharing rather than institutionalized payment.

Institutions are not bad per se, indeed they can serve crucial functions that individuals or even adhoc groups cannot. Yet they also have a tendency to become self-centered (Wink's fallen powers). But what I want to focus on is not that, but that institutions are usually about reducing vulnerability with structure.

vulnerability is not the same as fragility. Fragility is breaking under pressure

today we are not at the beginning of the movement that Jesus institutes here, in fact it sometimes seems like we are at the end, less people, less resources, anxieties about the future. It's not the end, but it may be the end of our institutions/world/cosmos (as we know it)

Maybe we need to recover the importance of vulnerability as we step into a time of collapsing institutions.

not self-care but community care.

Keith & Gretchen or Ana y Quito as I knew them in Argentina were doing this mision sin conquista, mission without conquest, vulnerable mission

this is the counterscript to the way much of Christian mission has worked.

One of the ways i think about this is that for some of us (many of us?) who are white and privileged, we haven't needed to be vulnerable because we are in control. We are, in many ways, functional atheists. The good news about what i hear in what you've said, it that you're uncovering our need. And also exposing the lie that we're in control.

“The wound is the place where the light enters you.” -Rumi

To love is to risk not being loved in return. To hope is to risk pain. To try is to risk failure, but risk must be taken, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.

Leo Buscaglia.