

Going barefoot is also a vulnerable act. When you don't have shoes on, it's possible for someone else to step on your toes and hurt you! Or you might step on something that makes you wince. It's a sign, then, that one is willing to be vulnerable before God, willing to be open to whatever God chooses to reveal or bestow.

And there's one more thing. Being barefoot in a room full of folks has an incredibly equalizing effect. Over the last couple of days, I have prayed next to doctors, lawyers, and professors, as well as construction workers, mechanics, and high school students. I have prayed next to Jordanians, Syrians, Palestinians, Somalians, Sudanese, Americans, and Pakistanis.

But when we are in the prayer room, wealth and class and ethnicity don't matter anymore. We are all children of the one true God, showing our reverence and giving our praise.

We are simply barefoot and bowed.

Compassion

Fasting does indeed put all of us in solidarity with those who struggle with basic survival resources.

First, it is a lesson in empathy. Those of us who live in developed countries generally (though not all) have access to clean drinking water and food on a regular basis. However, there are great numbers of people in the world who do not. When we choose not to drink or eat for a whole day, we get a glimpse of what it is like to have to travel eight miles (or more) for a drink. We learn what it is like to move around throughout the day with a gnawing hunger in the pit of our stomach. **This seed of empathy then has a chance to grow, and become "compassion."** The word "compassion" in English comes from two words, "com-" meaning "with", and "-passion," meaning "to suffer." Thus, when you suffer with someone, you naturally will develop compassion for that person.

Having compassion for the poor and needy of the world is a first, vital step in our faith journey, but it certainly doesn't end there.

Next, we must become generous givers, sharing with those in need out of our own God-given bounty. I have learned that this concept is the basis of one of the pillars of Islam, almsgiving, or the Zakah. It is a duty of every Muslim prosperous enough to have accumulated and retained wealth in the form of savings over the course of the year to give 2.5% of his wealth to the poor. The giving of Zakah occurs during the month of Ramadan.

Christians also believe that charitable giving is an important part of living out our faith. The writer of James in the New Testament said, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? **So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.**"

It is clear that people of faith have an obligation, laid out by God, to give to those in need.

But if we stop there, if we only concern ourselves with feeling empathy and compassion, and with giving a few dollars to the poor, we have failed to be the people God calls us to be. There is another level of engagement with the poor which God demands.

That third level is the pursuit of justice on behalf of the poor. Eventually, we must ask ourselves, "Why are there people who still do not have access to clean drinking water? Why are some nations still mired in poverty? Why is most of the world's wealth concentrated in the hands of just a few individuals and corporations?"

These are questions of justice, and they are increasingly a matter which people of faith must address. **If we do not address the root causes of poverty, then we may likely find ourselves feeding the same poor people over and over again, never actually reaching out to bring them up to the level of dignity and self-sustenance which they so desperately desire.** To remain in a constant state of dependence upon the charitable acts of others for one's basic needs would be a **debilitating, degrading existence.**

In my experience as a Christian pastor, justice is the hardest kind of work to do. People are easily moved to feel compassion, and they can also be very generous when it comes to giving to charitable causes.

When you ask someone to change the way they do business, however, then you begin to step on toes. When you begin to point out the injustices and inequities in laws, then you begin to step on toes. When you expose the selfishness and greed that lies at the heart of Wall Street, then you begin to step on toes.

When I fast, I try to move through all three stages of concern for the poor – from compassion to giving to justice. This year, Ramadan has forced me into deeper levels of each stage. And so I'm learning how to step on toes ... even harder!

Prayer

And so I prayed like a Muslim for the first time in my life, as I attempted to imitate every move.

I did not know the words prayed aloud, of course. Instead, I let the sound and experience simply wash over me. I let it happen to me.

In the silent moments, I quietly repeated the words of the Lord's Prayer, and let that be my own guide to prayer. In my faith tradition, prayer is viewed simply as an attitude of the heart. We generally eschew different postures of prayer, though at times, we will kneel. Most of the time, however, we pray while sitting or standing. It is a mental exercise.

But **Muslim prayers are an exciting blend of mind, spirit & body.** Every move, bow, prostration is itself a prayer – a prayer of muscles, nerves, joints. The

cumulative effect is that one is wholly immersed in the event. There is no way you can compartmentalize your prayer, or try to multitask while praying – it is what you are doing with your whole self. You have to be completely absorbed in the moment.

I am perfectly aware, of course, that it is possible to simply **"go through the motions"** of Islamic prayer, but I think it must be more difficult, because the body is engaged.

And when my forehead touched the carpet on the ground, I found myself deeply awed. I was struck by my vulnerability. I was kneeling forward, head down, neck bared. There is no more vulnerable position than that. It is a symbol of the supreme Islamic value of "submission" to God. When you are bowing in that position, you are acting the role of slave to God, the Master.

I must admit that, in some ways, this posture makes me uncomfortable. I do not like being "in submission." It makes me think of African slaves in Southern plantations, and of women cowering under the blows of their husbands. I don't like to picture God as someone who towers over me, threatening me with his fist at every moment.

But that is not what is meant by "submission." Instead, something much closer to "reverence" is meant.

When we come to realize that God is above and beyond our every conception of God, and is utterly transcendent, then we, in awe, recognize that we do not even begin to comprehend who God really is. Our best response is to bow down in awe at the wonder and glory of God's mysterious and baffling grace. When we come to realize that God is our loving parent, full of compassion and mercy toward us, then we, in profound gratitude, fall down on our faces and let God's love wash over us.

What I experienced in that posture was "the fear of the Lord," which is a Jewish phrase that doesn't mean "fear" in the sense of the human emotion of horror or dread, but an overwhelming feeling of awe, the kind that takes your breath and speech away. I love that the Islamic posture of prayer embodies these aspects of our relationship to God. I doubt that I will ever be able to convince my fellow Methodists to prostrate themselves on the floor of our church, but it never hurts to try!

Fasting is intensely personal and intimate. It really is about what transpires in your own heart between you and God. All of us will find ourselves ultimately standing in the presence of God, and in that moment, we will be nakedly alone, **stripped bare of all pretense and disguise.** It will be you and God alone. In that moment, God will **not** simply ask us if we fasted, **but if we did justice, made peace, loved our neighbours, and blessed the world.**

The whole point of Ramadan is to be changed – for good.

A The whole point of Ramadan is to be changed – for good Christian Fasts in Ramadan

It's not simply a set of exercises that one must endure for thirty days so that you can earn a reward in heaven, or earn a check mark next to your name on the "Good" list.

I'm not a sadomasochist. Really. I don't have a martyr's complex either. I do not enjoy suffering.

However, the experience of fasting was transcendent; I have **never done anything so liberating**, both socially or spiritually. But there were some, shall we say, "side-effects." Not everyone in my religious tribe was thrilled about my choice. There was backlash & resistance. That was painful.

Put another way, I am free to pursue justice and make shalom with anyone who wishes to do the same. I made it known that I wanted to fast for **two reasons: one, to develop the spiritual discipline of fasting; and two, to stand in solidarity with American Muslims who struggle for acceptance and community.** I wouldn't say I "mastered" the Ramadan fast, but I did survive it. And I would like to go even further — I want to try to **live in the constant presence of God.** I want to continue to push myself, to more wholeheartedly embrace the discipline of letting go, giving up, abstaining from.

When Rev. Dr. Wes Magruder, senior associate at First Rowlett United Methodist Church in Rowlett, Texas, decided to join his longtime friend, Imam Yaseen Shaikh of Plano, in observing the Ramadan fast, **he couldn't have foreseen the spiritual growth it would offer – but neither did he foresee the noisy objections that arose from within his own congregation.**

Here is his amazing story: I need to continue to stand side by side with Muslims in my community. My experience revealed to me that **a great number of Americans continue to hold misguided, uninformed, and dangerous** opinions about Islam and its practitioners. I learned that too many Americans allow Fox News to tell them who their neighbour is.

If anything, Muslims need our support more than ever. As a person of faith, I have so much more in common with them than practically any other kind of person in our culture. **My faith is enriched when I make real and vital connections** with other people of faith, no matter what their particular faith looks or feels like.

As I near the end of Ramadan, I have begun considering what my daily routine will be like without fasting. I have fallen into a consistent pattern that begins at 4:15 am with a morning meal, chased with lots of water, Bible reading, and prayer. I typically get back into bed for another hour or so of sleep.

Throughout the day, whenever I begin to crave a drink or snack, I snap back to attention before God and whisper a prayer. Then, about 8:15 pm, I grab a date, take a long drink of water, and the fast is broken.

It makes me a little sad that I will be following this routine for only a couple more days. But I hope that my life is forever changed by the experience, and I hope there are long-term effects of my fast. **The whole point of Ramadan is to be changed – for good. It's not simply a set of exercises** that one must endure for thirty days so that you can earn a reward in heaven, or earn a check mark next to your name on the “Good” list.

And living “right” during Ramadan does not give one license to live “wrong” the other eleven months of the year. As one Muslim friend told me, Ramadan is like a spiritual “boot camp,” **training for the rest of the year. It's intended to make it easier to live in submission to God's will all the year round.**

I've heard it explained that fasting is learning how to say “no” to permissible things, in order that it may be easier for us to say “no” to things which are not permissible. I would add that it also helps us to say “yes” to the eternal, spiritual blessings which God offers to us in tiny, subtle ways throughout the day. That is a discipline we all need throughout the year.

Christians make the same mistake, of course. A

colleague told me about a parishioner he knew who gave up drinking beer during Lent. On Easter morning, the man loaded a cooler full of beer, and started drinking as soon as the sun came up. My colleague commented drily, “I don't think he really understood what Lent was all about.”

When we view the practice of fasting as something which must be endured in order to earn a reward, then we have entirely missed the point. Fasting is a discipline which forms and shapes us, **makes us into people who are more responsive to God.**

That's why I don't think I will know how effective my Ramadan fast has been until a few weeks after Ramadan is over. Will I act differently? Will I be closer to my God? Will I be more loving to my family and neighbors? Will I be more sensitive to people in need, to the poor and destitute? Will I show respect to those I disagree with?

If I manage to complete the 30-day fast successfully, but end up acting selfishly and hatefully on the thirty-first, or forty-first, or sixtieth day, then my first **Ramadan will have been a failure.**

Ablution

I was also invited, for the first time, to participate in wudu, the Islamic practice of ablution, or washing one's hands and feet before entering the prayer room.

Larry beckoned me to sit beside him on a stool in front of a faucet, and then walked me through the process. He showed me how to wash my hands, arms up to the elbow, mouth, face, ears, and feet.

This practice is based on a command from the Quran, which reads: “O you who believe! When you prepare for prayer, wash your faces, and your hands and arms to the elbows; Rub your heads with water; and wash your feet to the ankles.” (Sura 5.6)

As he was demonstrating the proper way to wash, Larry, who is a convert to Islam from Christianity, chuckled and said, “It's like a mini-baptism.”

I responded, “Yes, but we're using a lot more water than we normally use in baptism!”

The practice of ablution is related to the concept of taking off one's shoes, because it has to do with showing respect in a sacred space. But it goes deeper – it connotes the importance of coming before God with clean, pure hands, feet, and heart.

The Prophet Muhammad (p) is reported to have said, “Cleanliness is half of faith,” which sounds remarkably similar to the saying that Methodism's founder, John Wesley coined: “Cleanliness is next to godliness.”

All forms of ablution are essentially symbolic – the washing of one's body is meant to represent the cleansing of one's heart and soul. Just because you go to prayer with sparkling clean hands doesn't mean your heart is also pure. It's meant instead to be a reminder before prayer to lay aside those things which might be a hindrance to the contemplation

of God. As Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard famously put it, “purity of heart is to will **one** thing,” meaning that purity is really about **focus, single-mindedness.**

The religious pursuit of purity is not so much about being rid of dirt and sin, as it is about the embrace of God alone. In order to receive God's merciful embrace, we must open our fists, dropping those things which we were clinging to, and reaching out for the eternal One. **Purity is the crystalline, razor-sharp intention to let God, and God alone, fill one's heart, mind, and soul.**

As I washed my hands, face, and feet, I imagined that I was doing exactly this. As the drops of water rolled off my face, I pictured my preoccupations and prejudices rolling off my soul. As the stream of water splashed off my toes, I imagined the dust of the day's petty concerns and worries flow down the drain.

When I entered the prayer room with Larry, I willed myself to will one thing – God's own will. I prayed that God's will would be done on the earth, but especially in my life.

Yes, it was a sort of mini-baptism. The symbolic meaning of baptism for Christians is that one's sins are washed away, and that we are raised out of the water to new life. It's meant as an initiation ritual primarily, and so we celebrate baptism as a one-time event only.

However, upon reflection, I am reminded that there are precedents for mini-baptisms, or ablution, in Scripture and Christian tradition, especially in the surprising story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples.

In John 13, as the disciples gather for a meal, Jesus shocks the group by bending down to wash their feet for them. This was a task normally reserved for a servant, or another person of low status. But Jesus performed the rite himself.

When he was finished, he said, “If I, your Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (John 13:14-15)

In this story, Jesus affirms the importance of purity and cleanliness before God, but then adds a surprising twist by performing the ablution himself for the disciples. This is an act of supreme sacrifice, of laying one's own comfort and convenience aside for the other.

Then it struck me – **to serve others is to do God's will.** The two are intimately related.

When we purify our hearts, when we pledge ourselves to the pursuit of God's will, then we find ourselves being directed to serve others, to practice radical compassion, to empty ourselves for the good of God's children.

May our mini-baptisms consistently direct us to serve others in God's name.

Barefoot

I have started wearing my TOMS shoes to the mosque, because they are very easy to slip on and off. And I

have begun to meditate on the discipline of being barefoot.

I asked a friend tonight why Muslims took their shoes off for prayers. He responded by referring me to a story from the Bible that I know well.

Moses was shepherding a flock at the foot of Mt. Horeb when he turned aside to look at a bush that was burning, but not being consumed. As he approached the strange conflagration, God said, “Don't come any closer! Take the sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5).

“Holy ground” is the place where God comes to meet with humanity in a close and intimate way. In Christian tradition, we sometimes refer to this as a “thin place,” a space where the division between heaven and earth, the sacred and secular, is rather thin.

Our response to being on “holy ground” is to humble ourselves, to strip off those things which would keep us from putting our whole attention on God's presence. Shoes are a simple, symbolic representation of the kind of humility that ought to accompany us into the “thin places.”

This tradition of going barefoot in worship is not something which has carried over into the Christian church, at least not in North America. I am used to wearing shoes at all my church functions, whether worship or administrative. Most of the time, I wear black or brown dress shoes, with dark dress socks. Sometimes I am able to get away with wearing sneakers, or my red and black Vans, to the office during the week, but even this can be considered “subversive”!

I wonder what the effect would be to begin the practice of going barefoot in all of my worship gatherings. I wonder if it would cause me to begin to rediscover the sacredness of our space. Too often, I'm not sure if I actually expect God to show up in our services. I know how to go through the order of worship, how to read Scripture and deliver a sermon, how to offer Communion to people.

Yet if I really treated the sanctuary on Sunday morning as a “thin place,” wouldn't I want to take my shoes off, and revel in the mystery?

I've discovered that there are other benefits to going barefoot, as well. For one, it relaxes me. Having my shoes off makes me feel as if I am at home, as if I'm in a place that is comfortable enough to dispense with formalities. In the South, the saying goes, “Stay a while – kick your shoes off!”

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