

Neither Barefoot Nor Shod

Walking the Straight and Narrow Path of Justice

or "Musings on the Pedal" By Benjamin Shaffer



Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways.

~Proverbs 4:26

According to the Metaphysical Bible Dictionary by Charles Fillmore, shoes can "represent the words with which understanding (Truth) is clothed. When holy ground, or substance in its spiritual wholeness, is approached by man he must put off from his understanding all limited thoughts about the Absolute--he must put his shoes off his feet" (p. 887)

In the first degree perhaps one reason we are neither barefoot nor shod is because in approaching the divine and esoteric secrets of freemasonry we are seeking to obtain knowledge which is beyond mere words, a gnosis of the divine, by means which are limited. The symbols of freemasonry are like the shoe which represents a means of conveyance, something which clothes

something more. By removing one shoe we also attempt to approach the Holy ground these symbols point to. As such the symbols of freemasonry are mere landmarks, signposts, labels or monikers which are intended to lead to truths that are beyond the ability of finite man to convey. With this truth in mind I pray that the words and symbols used in this essay will also lead you to a realization of truths beyond these words.

Initially we are taught that the removal of one shoe is a symbol of the covenant nature of masonry. That sincerity in our intentions is manifest in this act, showing a testimony that we most solemnly take upon ourselves the duties of the fraternity. Further we are encouraged to study the book of Ruth, which demonstrates the principles of Justice and the making and keeping of solemn obligations and covenants.

Perhaps the removal of the shoe shows commitment because it is hard to run away from your obligation when you are barefoot. This shows commitment to stay and see an undertaking through to the end. A shoe is also a very personal thing, it conforms to the foot and once broken in it is the exclusive property of its owner and will never fit another properly again. This is one reason that in the fairytale of Cinder Ella that it was the slipper that was proof of her identity and fitness to marry the prince. Once it had been found that "If the shoe fits..." She was obligated to run no more.

We are given an even better tale by which to explore the nature of this symbol in the story of Ruth. This symbol features more than once in this tale. First Ruth removed Boaz's shoes when she came to the threshing floor. (Ruth 3:7) This may have been the actual



act of their marriage, as removing the shoes was not only symbolic of the duty of Boaz as Ruth's kinsman to take her as his wife, but is also symbolic of the making of a covenant, and the revealing of his nakedness.

It was also the first time they were alone together, this is enough to traditionally constitute a Jewish marriage, and at least signified their mutual intention. Second, When Boaz makes this union public he does so by having the other kinsman of Ruth remove his shoe to show that he surrendered his claim to Ruth. (Ruth 4:8) Marriage is the prototypical covenant or promise, as such the shoe represents the wife. Therefore he gave Boaz his shoe. This ritual is called in Hebrew, Chalitzah, which is a verb meaning to become unshod.

The Levirate law was the ancient marriage law being enacted in this tale. It is an order of patriarchal and typically polygamous marriage wherein the kinsman of a widow is obligated to marry her. This ensures that the widow will be cared for, and that an heir will be produced for the deceased. If the duty is not fulfilled, thus leaving the widow without a husband or heir, the kinsman who thus refused is to be publicly humiliated by the widow spitting in his face and his shoe removed. He will then be remembered as one who did not do his duty and will be called "him who hath his shoe loosed." (Deut. 25:5-10) This can serve as a reminder of the distinction

between humility, and humiliation. If we humbly walk in the path of our duty we will bring about justice. If we fail to live up to our principles we may end up like the "one who hath his shoe loosed" and be publicly humiliated. Either way our choice is either to humble ourselves to the fulfillment of our duty, or to be humbled, and humiliated, by our failures. Our selfishness and pride will have to end, one way or the other.

It is also significant that the land of the inheritance was exchanged. (Ruth 4:6) Boaz was thereby obligated to give the land to the child of Ruth. (Leviticus 25:25) In this way he fulfilled the commandment to care for the widow and fatherless. This ceremony was to be done in the city gates. (Ruth 4:1) This shows the vital connection between the social and moral virtues, that our domestic and public duties are intertwined. One cannot practice the social virtues without fulfilling their domestic moral duties. In Israel the gates of the city were places of gathering to settle disputes and perform public duties. In this way they served much as a courtroom does today. The bible contains many admonitions to "execute the judgment of truth and peace in [the] gates:" (e.g. Zech. 8:16) To fulfill our duties to God, our country, and each other, is the full measure of doing justice.

While the particular moral and public duties demonstrated by Ruth and Boaz may seem foreign in our modern society, the lesson is still applicable that there is an essential nexus between our moral actions in private and the fulfillment of justice in our lives. Duty does not ask for our personal preferences, and will entertain no excuses.

When considered in this way justice can mean more than execution of law, or fairness; justice is to do good and fulfill our Masonic obligations to bring about a world in which Brotherly love, Relief and Truth are realized. Justice is the guide on the path which leads to this goal. In Chinese the word for this is Dao, it means the path, but can also be metaphorical for a guiding principle of all our actions. Thus Justice is our guide on the path, the Dao by which the world is made better.

Therefore when we contemplate the perfect points of entrance¹, and that the pedal represents justice, we should ponder where we are headed in life, and what our goals are. Do our feet run to evil? (Isa. 59:7) or do we acknowledge that by adherence to right principles that God will make our paths straight? (Proverbs 3:6) Let us remember the admonition of the Holy Saint: John the Baptist, who symbolically presides over this lodge, when he said "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." (Mark 1:3)

1 We might consider the Perfect Points of Entrance into masonry as demonstrated in the ritual, though they are not enacted in the order in which they are listed, as: the reception upon the point of a sharp instrument, (Pectoral) the due guard, (manual) the penal sign, (guttural) and the position in the northeast corner of the lodge upon the first step of Freemasonry, (pedal). In this way each of the points allude to obligations, penalties, and moral responsibilities. These would seem to be the principal points of a candidate's entry into the Lodge, and would explain, and support the importance of, the perfect points of entrance in our First Degree ritual.

The first regular step of a mason refers to this symbol as well. When placed on the first step of a mason we are told that there we stand just and upright entered apprentice masons. We are also given the charge to so ever walk and act. This means not only that we are to be just, or live the principles of justice as symbolized by the pedal, but we are to continue walking that path. It is called the first step of a mason, not the last step of a mason.

In the capitular degrees of the so called York rite², the Principal Sojourner of the royal arch degree quotes from Isaiah a passage which refers to this symbolism. "And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked paths straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them. (Isa. 42:16) As masons let us consider this promise from the Holy Bible which sums up the entire first degree in a single verse. It is by walking in right principles that we are brought from darkness to light.

In conclusion, let us each seek to do his duty by the practice of the social and moral virtues. Only then can we take on the whole armor of God, our feet shod with the gospel of Peace. (Eph. 6:15) Only then can we be spiritually and mentally both barefoot and shod. Barefoot in that we are prepared to enter the holy ground of direct experience of the divine, and shod in that we are clothed and directed by the ancient landmarks of the order and guided by our duty. May we so ever walk and act.

² In the union of 1813 the grand lodges of England drafted a concordance, or articles of union, which stated the "Ancient craft of masonry consists of three degrees and the holy royal arch." Two particularly significant alterations were made to Article two of these documents: the phrase originally read "four degrees" was changed to "three degrees, and the holy royal arch." (*Douglas Burford*, Royal Arch Batham Lecture: "The Anomalies of the Royal Arch-Craft Connection" 1993.) This indicates that The royal arch degree was held by some at the time to be an essential part of becoming a master mason.