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Another Mile

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My one-year-old granddaughter persistently removes her shoes. We can load her into the car seat for a short hop and, upon arrival at our destination, discover that she has pulled off her shoes and socks, scattering them in the back seat. Before we can go inside, we're forced to hunt for each piece of footwear.

This habit completely reverses when they are someone else's shoes. She loves to put her brother's boots on. She wears her daddy's and mama's shoes. She pulled out my winter boots and tromped around the living room. This past week, we even caught my granddaughter using two dog bowls as shoes, scuffling through the kitchen. She is pretty off-balance in shoes that don't fit. She regularly trips and lands on her bottom, struggling to get back to her feet. Nonetheless, she loves the adventure.

It is said we should walk a mile in another's shoes before judging them. The Bible also speaks of the non-judgmental compassion that we should cultivate toward others: *"If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself."* (Philippians 2:1-5, The Message).



Our ability to do this as youngsters apparently gets tempered out of us as we age. Just as we are taught to wear our own, well-fitting shoes, we also narrow our perspectives. We become comfortable with the patterns and behaviors and lifestyles that suit us well. We get a running start on life. The approaches of others can seem ill-advised or inferior.

For some reason, I've always understood the admonition to walk a mile in another's shoes as a way to feel empathy toward another's misfortunes. In that, I assumed metaphorically that I had the better shoes, comfortable but classy. Walking in the shoes of someone who had holes at the toes or tattered soles could help me understand their situation and be more compassionate. That perspective can be important, of course, but less so when it always starts with me in a position of superiority.

What if instead we changed the assumptions and strove to walk in shoes that were too big for us? What if they were the shoes of people we admired and loved, the people we wanted to be like when we grew up? As we strive to exhibit caring relationships, we might start by strapping on the sandals that Jesus wore.

This approach might cause more stumbling, with the prospect of landing on our bottoms from time to time. We might feel off-balance. We might even need a helping hand to get us back on our feet. If we've gotten anything out of following Christ, however, then we'll tug off our own shoes and toss them in the back seat, ready to start our adventure.