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## Samuel Wells: Shaking the dust

*That's the life of a missionary -- shaking dust. So shake, shake, shake, and let God do what only God can do, says the noted preacher.*

by [Samuel Wells](#)



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*Editor's note: Faith & Leadership offers sermons that shed light on issues of Christian leadership. The Rev. Dr. Sam Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, preached the following sermon at the Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church on June 17, 2011, during his tenure as dean of Duke University Chapel.*

It was Christmas Eve, around 14 years ago. I was a young pastor. (In fact, as you see, I'm still a young pastor.) A few months earlier, I'd been appointed to a church whose Sunday morning congregation was about 15. We had started making plans for Christmas. We'd made a leaflet with a wise Christmas message and all the Christmas worship services on it.

I'd insisted there should be a midnight communion. That was always the highlight of my Christmas growing up. No one in the congregation remembered ever going to church at midnight, but I still thought it was a great idea. I'd set the time for 11:30 p.m., Dec. 24.

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GO

We'd organized. We'd leafleted the whole neighborhood -- more than 3,000 houses.

11 p.m. came. No one there.

11:15 ... still no one there.

11:25 ... still just me, the bread and the wine.

11:30 ... I tried so hard, so hard, to stop a tear beginning to roll down my eyelashes.

I tried. Believe me, I tried. And I believe every single person here knows what that tear feels like. And when you put your head in your hands and try to disentangle the strands of your disappointment and humiliation, you begin to separate out two kinds of feelings.

One is failure -- the sense that if you were a better person or if you'd tried harder or if you were a more charismatic or skilled leader, then things would have turned out fine and dandy. The reassuring thing about failure is that it allows you to preserve your narcissism, your deep-lying pride that says this is really all fundamentally about you, and that if it went wrong, it was because you got it wrong -- all of which preserves the underlying conviction that you can get it right and that, if and when you do, it'll be because of your brilliance.

But failure is only half of it. The other feeling is rejection. And there are two kinds of rejection. One is hostility.

A few months later, I was walking back from a community meeting [in the same neighborhood], and I saw a 16-year-old girl. She said, "Are you the new pastor?" I said yes, although I didn't feel I was new by that time. She said casually, "I used to know the old pastor. I used to throw stones at his windows."

"Why did you want to do that?" I asked, feeling an existential tug on my need to inquire. "Oh," she said, "you see, I don't believe in God," in a tone of voice that clearly assumed I would respond, "Oh, of course, I get it; that makes sense now."

That's hostility. But there's another kind of rejection, and that's indifference. I'm going to talk about hostility this evening. But right now, I want to focus on indifference.

I wonder if you've ever sat at a table trying to talk to someone and found that you're losing the battle with their mobile cellular device. You're trying to look into their eyes, but their eyes keep dipping down to glance at the little screen. You're trying to talk about reality, but everything in their body is really attending to this virtual reality that's wooing them with differently toned beeping noises at odd intervals.

Is it me, you're asking yourself? Am I too boring, too threatening, too intense, too in-your-face, too demanding, just too much for you? Maybe the problem is that that little electronic device offers you a future of texted assignments or emailed future plans, or YouTubed funny moments or twittered allegations, a whole fantasy world of unaccountable possibility and non-material alternatives. But I, sitting here in front of you, offer you simple, prosaic, present-tense reality, and no escape hatch.

And that overwhelming tsunami of reality is what [encountering] God feels like. Before we get too self-righteous and resentful about the colleagues, friends or family members who seem increasingly addicted to a life of distraction and allergic to being present face to face with us, just wait a moment. That's what we're all like before God. We're all fiddling and fantasizing and distracting and avoiding eye contact and pretending to be tired and looking bored and being addicted to elsewhere.

God is the one who is longing to look into our eyes. We are the ones who fidget and slouch and find a hundred ways of asking if we can get down from the table. That's what it means to be indifferent. Indifference is saying, "Can I think about something else, please?"

When I moved to the northeast of England, I found I had to relearn parts of my vocabulary. Where I grew up, if you said to someone, "Tea or coffee?" and they said, "I'm not bothered," you'd take it as a sign that they'd be equally glad for either, and even as a subtle way of saying, "It's really your company I'm enjoying. The drink -- and the time it takes to make it -- is just a way of enjoying each other a little longer."

But in Newcastle, if you said to someone, "Tea or coffee?" and they said, "I'm not bothered," what they were saying was, "I don't want either," and you'd take it as a sign that they were uncomfortable about something and wanted the conversation to end very soon.

My experience in ministry has taught me to see indifference in this second way. "I'm not bothered" usually means, "Please don't force me to think about these things. I'm working as hard as I can to avoid this kind of thinking and conversation, and you're ruining it."

This is the reaction God gets from us, all of us, almost every second of every day. And if you're going to be a missionary and join in the mission of God, this is the reaction you're going to need to get used to. When Jesus sends out his apostles, he says, "As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town" (Matthew 10:12-14 NRSV).

That's the life of a missionary. Lots of shaking dust.

Realize that indifference is just as true of the Christians as it is of the non-Christians. Sure, for most people, indifference is saying, "I've got my hands full keeping my life in one piece right now. I'm mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted most of the time. I just don't have it in me to think about these things." And our response is first of all one of compassion, because Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are [heavy laden], and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29).

But often, indifference is saying, "Don't trouble me with all these details. The point of Christianity is to teach me to love my neighbor and for me to know my eternal salvation's in the bag. I've got those, so now please leave me alone."

I'm sure you've come across the psychological category of passive-aggressive behavior. Passive-aggressive people tend not to be assertive or explicitly state their demands; instead, they tend to procrastinate, constantly say how vulnerable and dependent they feel, leave jobs unfinished and deftly but infuriatingly avoid accountability or confrontation.

If you're starting to feel a shiver down your spine, it's maybe because I'm describing a typical United Methodist congregation -- or perhaps more accurately, a typical church council. A passive-aggressive person has got the message that it's inappropriate to show anger or true feelings and has learned to get their way through prevarication and manipulation instead.

To be on the receiving end of this kind of indifference is to feel like a cat getting tangled up in a ball of wool. The infuriating thing about church life is that, because it doesn't involve shouting or hitting or confronting each other, there are a whole lot of people who've been socialized into regarding passive aggression as genuinely Christian behavior. You find yourself making up so many excuses for your colleague or suppressing so many things you'd really like to say to your family member that you store up an ocean of fury and frustration mixed with paralyzed bewilderment and confused guilt.

Exactly the feelings I had that Christmas Eve, sitting alone in an empty church, wondering why no one had come to my precious midnight communion.

In other words, indifference is almost never what it seems. It seems to be a genuinely careless, maybe carefree attitude that the claims of the Christian faith are a mere curiosity, an idle tale. But scratch the surface, and indifference is most commonly one of three things.

It may be a mask that hides profound feelings of exhaustion, fear, hurt or bitterness -- a way of protecting oneself from being [further] hurt or overwhelmed or terrified. It may be a carefully orchestrated attempt to avoid taking anything in life too seriously, to take refuge in one distraction after another, a way of escaping direct attention to death, regret, fragility or even love -- in other words, an elaborately massaged form of despair. Or it may be a studied technique to duck out of any confrontation or direct challenge by a show of incorrigible passivity.

I'm assuming everyone here knows what it feels like to be a cat tangled up in this kind of ball of wool. What you all know better than I do is what happens when this tangled ball of indifference gets infused with a dose of Southern civility. In the nicest possible way, you discover that no one at your church is

willing to make a decision, half your staff members exist in a tangled ball of procrastination and obfuscation, and everyone in your neighborhood loves you so long as you don't introduce any new people, any new ideas or any new energy.

I'm assuming everyone here has faced a choice between hurling your computer through a closed window, grabbing the shoulders of a church member and screaming, "I'm going out of my mind here" or sitting down, head in hands, like I did that night before Christmas and letting the tears seep through your splayed fingers and down the well-ironed sleeves of your best holiday shirt.

It's hard to imagine anyone responding to Jesus with indifference. But of course they did. Feel the venom in the words of Revelation toward the church in Laodicea: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:15-16).

I think we can all relate to that. Spare me the civility, and show me what you really think of me. For God to create the universe, for God to stay faithful to Israel through joy and despair, for Jesus to die in agony, for the Holy Spirit to come down with tongues of fire ... and then for someone to shrug their shoulders and say, "Whatever" -- that's passive-aggressive indifference if you ever saw it, on a genuinely global scale.

So what does Jesus tell us to do?

Jesus says, "Shake the dust off your feet."

The sands of time are heavy. Shake the dust off your feet. You don't know why it is that all your efforts are met with indifference. Shake the dust off your feet.

Don't assume this is all about you -- it's not a personal vote against you, and it's not a challenge for you to turn into an inspired, charismatic genius. Shake the dust off your feet.

This isn't failure; it's rejection. They're not the same thing. Shake the dust off your feet.

Don't carry that dust everywhere you go, embittering relationships, souring friendships, sapping energy, leaking hope. Shake the dust off your feet.

Don't take out your anger on people when you have no idea what's making them be so bafflingly indifferent. Shake the dust off your feet.

Don't judge them -- that's God's job, not yours, and only God knows why they're so distracted or so passive or so frustrating or so silent. Shake the dust off your feet.

Don't go on a self-righteous rant that assumes you're a perfect embodiment of the gospel and anyone who doesn't repent and be baptized this instant must be stupid. Shake the dust off your feet. Shake, shake, shake.

To use a sporting metaphor, leave it on the field. Don't carry it round with you. Jesus faced indifference. He said we would face indifference. Don't be surprised; don't be devastated; don't be bitter. Shake the dust off your feet.

Isn't this why pastors and missionaries burn out? Because we offer wave upon wave of effort and hope and energy, and find ourselves met with indifference and passive aggression and a shrug of the shoulders that says, "Whatever." Because we can't get over the indifference.

Hostility is alive -- it makes us feel important, part of an epic drama -- but indifference is so insipid, so draining, so debilitating. We can't believe a bit more effort from us won't break it down. So we don't shake the dust. We go on trying, way too long. We lose all perspective. We take it to heart. We lose the joy. We start to go through the motions. Before we know it, we're inhaling dust and we can't breathe, and we're drowning.

Is that where you are right now? Listen to these words of our Lord Jesus Christ: "Shake the dust. Shake it. Shake, shake, shake. Leave this one to me."

But what then? You've left that one to God. But what happens to the grief and the sadness and the loss and the pain? You're walking away from this person or house or town, the job not done. The dust not settled.

Just stay with that word a moment: *dust*.

What is dust? Dust is dead skin. Dust is dry earth. Remember what God says to Adam in Genesis chapter 3? "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). It's what we say to each other on Ash Wednesday. Dust and ashes. Dust is death.

And yet in Genesis 2, we're told that God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed life into his nostrils. When we reject God, by hostility or indifference, *we make dust* -- we make death, we become the dust of the earth -- to dust we return.

And what does God do? *God makes us anew from the dust of the earth*. God makes something beautiful out of our dust and ashes. When we shake the dust off our feet, we're saying, "Thank you, Lord God, for the privilege of being part of the way you redeem the world. I've tried with this, your precious child, and I've been rejected. You're going to have to re-create this one on your own."

You made anything out of dust and ashes lately? 'Course you haven't. Can't be done.

God made anything out of dust and ashes lately? 'Course God has. Does it all the time.

Shake the dust off your feet. Shake, shake, shake. And when you shake dust, don't lament your failure but praise the God who made all things out of the dust of the earth and in Christ made all things new, and still does.

By shaking the dust, you're letting God do what only God can do. Shaking dust isn't sadly washing your hands of failure or angrily tossing aside a broken project. Shaking dust is a prayer that God will do a miracle by making beauty arise from ashes and making life come from the dust of the earth. You have prepared the way of the Lord; that's all you can do. Now, pray that all people will see the salvation of our God.

As I sat in that church late that Christmas Eve, my face in my hands and the first tear beginning to work its way down my fingers to my wrist, I heard a rustling noise. I looked at my watch.

It was 11:32. The door opened. Into the church walked a man and a woman, maybe late 40s. I'd never seen them before.

"Is it just us?" they asked.

"I'm afraid it is," I replied, totally humiliated.

"Oh, good," the woman said. "We waited to see if anyone else would come, and when we thought we'd be the only ones, we walked in."

"How do you mean?" I said, gesturing them to sit down.

"Well," she said, "I guess you should know that Dave and I used to be married to other people until recently. There's a lot of folk unhappy about us being together. We moved out here because we didn't feel we could go to any of the downtown churches. In fact, we haven't been to church at all for over a year. We were frightened to come tonight, but when we saw we'd be the only ones, we got the courage to walk through the door. Our lives are a mixture of love and shame. We feel we're in the dust. We want to begin again."

I stared at them in silence for a long time. Any thought of failure and rejection evaporated. All I could see before me was dust, dust and ashes, two people coming before God in dust and ashes. God was making a new creation before my very eyes, and making it from the dust of the earth, just like the first time.

I said to them, "Remember you are dust. This is where God's work of creation and redemption begins. Right here. Right now."

And there I'd been, two minutes earlier, cursing indifference. And there was God, making glory from the dust of the earth.

Shake the dust. Shake, shake, shake. And see the glory of what God alone can do.