

Following in the Footsteps of the Shepherd

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Today, Good Shepherd Sunday, brings us to what is about the half-way point of the Church's festive season of Easter—which consists of the fifty days between the Resurrection and Pentecost. It's a time set aside to celebrate the completion of all that our Lord Jesus accomplished by laying down his life as the spotless sacrifice for our sin and then taking his life up again exactly as he said he would. And what we want to do during this time is to mentally and spiritually place ourselves in the sandals of the original disciples. We want to experience with them first the joy of seeing the risen Lord. Then we want to know their relief and release from fear as he speaks his word of peace and forgiveness. And then finally, we want to learn again with them the unfolding revelation of divine truth as Jesus continues to open our minds to understand the Holy Scriptures: all the things that had been written about him that are now fulfilled.

And this is not merely an academic exercise. Jesus didn't die for our sin and rise again simply to inform us that some ancient prophecies and promises have been fulfilled and that as a result we can look forward one day to being taken to heaven to live with him. Sure, that much is true; but it's only part of the story. If that's all there were to it, he might just as well take us there now. But no, he's determined that we should remain in this world for a purpose. He has more for us to learn and to do. And a big part of that is to increasingly apply his death for sin and the power of his resurrection to our lives here in the present. You see, he doesn't declare to us his forgiveness purchased at so high a price so that we can say to ourselves, "Great. I'm off the hook", and then go on merrily wallowing in whatever sins and vices suit our fancy. No. Instead we are to learn what it means daily to die with him to sin and rise with him to live a new and holy life.

This is what we saw in last week's message. In it I asked you to think of yourself as a garden plot planted formerly with the lousy seeds of corruption that brought forth nothing but the weeds of sin, but now planted with the imperishable Seed of God's Word – specifically the Word of his grace and forgiveness in Jesus. And because Christ Jesus himself is the Word that's planted, it's Christ Jesus that ought to be seen growing in us so that we produce more and more Christ-like behavior.

Today I'd like to build on that idea a bit, shifting the image to one more consistent with today's theme; namely of sheep following their Shepherd. That is, after all, what sheep are supposed to do. I've mentioned this before, but typically what you had in villages of the ancient world was a communal sheep pen. In it all the various flocks and herds of the villagers would be kept together at night. Then, in the morning, each shepherd would call out his own sheep and they, recognizing the voice of their shepherd, would follow him to whatever pasture he would lead them for the day.

So now that's us: we are sheep in the pen of this world mixed up with all the others. But each morning Jesus, our Good Shepherd, calls us out by his Gospel of grace and forgiveness and bids us follow him. And we recognize his voice. And we think to ourselves, "Here's the guy who takes care of me, who leads me to where there are green pastures and quiet waters. He's the guy who defends me from all harm and danger. I'll follow him because I know he has my best interest at heart." (Okay, so

maybe real sheep don't have the intellect to do quite the same detailed analysis; but we're smarter than the average sheep. And you catch my drift: they know their shepherd and trust him, so they follow.) And they know how to detect a phony. There are other shepherds leading other flocks which might correspond to other religions or the empty philosophies of man; but they aren't the Good Shepherd. All their trails, as full and rewarding as they may seem to be in the short term, lead eventually to the slaughter house. We won't be fooled by them. And then there are the thieves and robbers who are only trying to fatten themselves at our expense. We won't be taken in by them either. No. We follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd. We know his voice when we hear it, and we go wherever he leads.

And as such we don't want to be turning aside at every little thing we pass that attracts our interest. Nor do we want to be wondering all over the place off the trail and just sort of keeping Jesus in sight from a distance. That's how sheep get separated from the flock. That's how they get lost and sometimes killed by wild animals. It's far better, as Peter says in this morning's Epistle, to follow right in the footsteps of Jesus. We want our feet to touch the ground in exactly the same places his did. And what we're talking about here is imitating Jesus and using his life as a pattern or example for our own.

A few years ago, you couldn't go anywhere in Christian circles without seeing the letters WWJD. It was on everything: T-shirts, bumper stickers, key chains, bracelets, you name it. To some extent it's still around today. The letters stand for "What Would Jesus Do?" The idea is that when confronted with a decision to make, especially a moral or ethical one, you should choose the course of action that you think Jesus would most likely follow. And I think there's a little bit of irony there because one thing I'm pretty sure Jesus would never do is try to make a lot of money selling trinkets emblazoned with a catchy gimmick to his followers. But beyond that, it's really the wrong question to ask. Casting it that way, "What *would* Jesus do?" leaves the question open to speculation. You have to take an educated guess. It's like you're a sheep running out ahead of the Shepherd who's come to a fork in the trail, and now you're trying to decide which way the Shepherd will turn and lead the flock when he gets there. The answer that the sheep will invariably come up with, of course, is whichever way looks easiest and best for the sheep at the moment—which may not at all be what the Shepherd has in mind. You see, only he knows the way to the best pasture that will do the flock the most good. And very often the trail that looks easiest isn't the one that leads there.

So like I said, "What *would* Jesus do?" is the wrong question. If we are truly *following* the Shepherd and trying to imitate him, we're walking right behind him and asking, "What *did* Jesus do?" We're putting our feet directly in his footprints so that his life, his walk of sinless perfection and steadfast faith, becomes the model for our own. This is what Peter means when he says that Christ left you an example. The actual word he uses means a traced outline. In the ancient world very few people could write. It was a special skill that few attained. So, when making an inscription in stone you'd have a professional scribe draw an outline of the letters which would then be carved out by the less skilled laborers with their chisels and hammers. That's the idea here. Jesus has written out the letters. He's left the design for us. All that remains is for us is to make sure we stay within the lines. That will ensure that our lives are copies of his own.

And that pretty much begs the question, "What exactly does Christ-like behavior look like? What is the pattern he left behind?" That's easy enough to answer. We know that Jesus committed no sin. When faced with temptations, he said, "No". When the

devil tried to talk him into things, he answered with what the Word of God had to say about it. Jesus invariably chose the hard right over the easy wrong. And this isn't rocket science. We know the difference between right and wrong. We too know what God has said in his commandments. And Jesus has given us his own Spirit to help direct and guide us. So, when it comes to basic questions of morality we know where the lines are ninety-nine point nine, nine percent of the time. And when we wander outside them, we know it. There really is no excuse for it.

What else do we know about the example Jesus left? Peter says, "No deceit was found in his mouth", which is to say Jesus always spoke the truth. He didn't lie. He didn't intentionally deceive anyone or lead them astray. Well, that too is an example easy enough to follow. And please understand that I'm not talking about the untruths you might say mistakenly in ignorance of all the facts, or of the kinds of fabrications that are sometimes necessary in this fallen world on account of good manners and just getting along, like when you write a pleasant thank you note for a gift you hate or when my wife says that my gray hairs make me look "distinguished". No they don't. They make me look old; but it's still nice of her to say it. I'm not talking about that kind of thing. I'm talking about knowing the truth and deliberately negating, twisting, or concealing it in order to gain an advantage or to avoid unpleasant consequences. Once again, when it comes to truthfulness we know exactly where the lines that describe Christ-like behavior are. And so we never have an excuse for going outside of them.

And let me say this: up to this point there's nothing I've said about following the example of Christ that most atheists or full-blown pagans wouldn't readily agree to. They too (for the most part) know the difference between right and wrong and between telling the truth and a lie. So, say it another way, nothing we've covered thus far is uniquely Christ-like behavior. Therefore, subject to the limitations of the fallen flesh, it's possible for anyone to strive to obey the law and tell the truth without ever following Jesus.

What makes the walk of a follower truly Christ-like is his or her attitude about personal justice. What happens when you are in the right, when you've done exactly what you're supposed to do, when you've honored the terms of a contract or agreement, when you've "pony-ed up" your fair share, or even gone above and beyond the call of duty and then you are made to suffer for it? Someone takes advantage of you. They lie about you. They attack your reputation. They steal your job or the promotion you earned. They take credit for your work or your ideas. They make you take the fall for their mistakes. They rip you off. They hurt you physically. What happens *then*?

Do you fly into righteous rage? Do you demand your rights? Do you threaten that you'll get even? Do you seek revenge? Do you hire a lawyer and go to court? That doesn't fit the pattern at all, does it? What did Jesus do? Which way do his footsteps lead? We know the answer. "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered he did not threaten." He suffered unjustly – more unjustly than you ever could – and yet he didn't demand his rights. He who was perfect in every way suffered in his body the penalty of all of our sins. And yet he does not seek revenge. No. He gives himself willingly in sacrificial love. He forgives. He befriends. He lifts us up again and again from where we have fallen in our failures and bids us, "Follow me."

And this, Peter tells us, is precisely *how* we are to follow him. It's in his example of suffering unjustly without complaining or becoming angry. "It's a gracious thing", he

says, “when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly, that is, for doing good.” That’s the example Christ has left for us to follow: bearing the consequences of the sins of others gladly and willingly; and it’s in conforming ourselves to that example that we become manifestly Christ-like. And please understand this is not some lofty, never-to-be-pursued, oh-pastor-you can’t-be-serious kind of goal that we talk about in church, nodding our heads with all appropriate piety, while really thinking, “I’d sooner be damned than give that a try.” No. Peter says, “To this you were called.” When Jesus said, “Follow me”, this is exactly what he was talking about. It’s the expectation he has for his followers. You ought to fear being damned if you imagine that it’s a goal not to be taken seriously.

But someone will protest, how can I do that? Why, I’ll be trampled on. They’ll rob me blind. They’ll take away everything I’ve got – everything I’ve worked so hard for. People will think I’m a fool. Yes. Maybe. At least that’s what happened to Jesus when he did it. Ah, but then God who judges justly raised him up and exalted him to the highest place. So, let me ask you: what did he lose in the end? Better yet, what did he gain? And who in all the glory of heaven will ever be thinking him a fool? No one. Instead they’ll be singing his praises for all eternity. I’d say that’s a pretty good pattern to follow.

And so, we return to the sheep pen. The Shepherd – our Good Shepherd – says, “Follow me. Walk in my footsteps. Let me be your example and your guide. And trust me for your safety and protection.” And following him he has promised that we shall never be in need. And when (not if) the trail leads through the valley of the shadow of death, there really is nothing to fear, for he is with us. He’s going to take care of us. His rod and staff, which are a whole lot mightier than anything we sheep can muster, comfort us. And to help us on the way he has prepared for us a place at his table, right here, even though we are surrounded by potential enemies. Here his grace and forgiveness for us overflow. And they give us the Spirit and strength to follow him according to the example he has given us.

Let us therefore make this our goal. Dying again with him through repentance to our sin, our untruthfulness, our unbelief, and our reluctance to bear the sins of others by surrendering our desire for personal justice into the hands of the righteous Judge, let’s receive again the assurance of his forgiveness. And then let’s rise again with him to a new life in steadfast faith to follow faithfully in his footsteps. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!