

Pentecost 14 (Proper 16), August 26, 2018, Sermon: Footprints

Text: Mark 7:1–13

Other Lessons: Isaiah 29:11–19; Psalm 14; Ephesians 5:22–33

Isaiah 29:11–19

**11** And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, “Read this,” he says, “I cannot, for it is sealed.” **12** And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, “Read this,” he says, “I cannot read.” And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, **14** therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”

**15** Ah, you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?” **16** You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, “He did not make me”; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, “He has no understanding”? **17** Is it not yet a very little while until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest? **18** In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. **19** The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

Ephesians 5:22–33

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. **23** For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. **24** Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

**25** Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, **26** that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, **27** so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. **28** In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. **29** For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, **30** because we are members of his body. **31** “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” **32** This mystery is profound, and I am saying that

it refers to Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Mark 7:1–13

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup> (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, <sup>4</sup> and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) <sup>5</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” <sup>6</sup> And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’

<sup>8</sup> You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” <sup>9</sup> And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! <sup>10</sup> For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ <sup>11</sup> But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban’ (that is, given to God)— <sup>12</sup> then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, <sup>13</sup> thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

As I read the Gospel for today, I thought about the question; **“Why do your disciples not walk in the traditions of our fathers?”** A question often posed in one way or another by the Jewish religious authorities to Jesus. One of the things that kept coming to my mind was that wonderful Christian poem entitled “Footprints.” It is framed and hanging in the Samson room. But for those of you not familiar with this cherished poem, it is a story about a person who dreams they are walking on a beach one night with Christ. During this walk, different scenes from the person’s life flash

across the sky; scenes which correspond to the footprints in the sand. During the good times in life, the author sees two sets of prints walking together—one set belonging to her and one set belonging to Christ. However, during the bad times in life, the author only sees one set of corresponding prints. This deeply troubles the author, and she lets her Lord know about it. “Why do I only see one set of prints when things got tough? Where were you when I needed you most?” To this Jesus responds, “That one set of prints you see is mine. You only see one set of prints during these tough times because those are the times I picked you up and carried you.”

That poem about faithful Christian discipleship doesn't seem to be associated with the Pharisee's notion of blindly walking in the footsteps of their fathers. But what Jesus was doing here when He spoke such harsh words to a group of people who should've known better, yet refused to listen, was directing their glance rearward. He was calling them back to Scripture, particularly the words of Isaiah. In a very real way, our Lord was pointing their eyes to the fact that there was only one set of footprints on their path of religiosity and that set didn't belong to Christ, nor did it lead to Christ. That lone set of prints was theirs and theirs alone. Their path; their walkway to holiness, as well traveled as it was by their forefathers, led only to their idea of holiness; not to God and His holiness; the only holiness which saves us. Their path; their

walkway was just that—THEIR path; THEIR walkway; not God’s path and walkway.

But what about us? It’s very easy to look down on the foolish Israelite leaders who had strayed from God, isn’t it? It’s quite another thing to actually look at ourselves as we blindly trudge forward. We need to take an honest glance back and truly acknowledge the fact that there are plenty of times in our daily lives when there are only one set of footprints on a trail—our trail—which has broken off and strayed away from Christ and His narrow path.

This is why I absolutely love God’s Law. Now I know that probably sounds like I’m a Pharisee, teaching and demanding of others what he himself cannot and will not do! But let me explain what I mean when I say that I love God’s Law. God’s Law is God’s Word for us. As it says in the Psalms, **“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; Your Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”**

A light unto my path...I like to think of God’s law as a series of road signs. God’s Law points me and directs me in the way that I

need to go. Do I always follow these signs? No! In fact, the more I examine myself in the light of God's Law, the more I realize that I have thoroughly and completely ignored His Word and command and driven far off His narrow pathway, instead I go the way **I** want to go. An honest look at God's Law shows me that I am completely lost and condemned in my sin. I cannot navigate myself into salvation—not even a little bit. I can't even take a single step—apart from Christ—in the right direction, for apart from Christ, all paths; all steps are in the wrong direction.

But this is why I love God's Law; God's perfect Word and light unto my path. His Law; His light, as much as it shows me quite clearly that I have strayed, also doesn't leave me there to die. He doesn't abandon me where I'm at. His Law and light leads me back to the very light of the world—Jesus Christ Himself. In fact, it is in this very act of turning around;, humbly repenting and confessing that I have strayed far away from Christ, that He is there to pick me up and carry me back to safety, setting my feet firmly on His narrow path of complete forgiveness, unconditional love, and everlasting salvation.

My brothers and sisters in Christ: this morning's Gospel lesson is often spoken against pastors who preach the Law. I pray that you understand that I don't stand here today, or any day for that matter, like some self-righteous Pharisee with the intent of pointing out all

the different ways you've strayed from God. Pastors get accused of this all the time. People don't like hearing about the sins they actually commit. I don't point out your sins. God's own Word does that, and sometimes, like it or not, He has to use harsher language to shake us awake and get our attention. "Yes! I'm talking to you!" It is only with the ears of saving faith that our Lord so graciously bestows upon us that we're able to hear Him speak this truth. It is only with the eyes of saving faith that the Holy Spirit, through the hearing of God's Word, enables us to take an honest, faithful look into His mirror and recognize the reality that—yes—we've strayed; we've wandered, and we're lost and dead in our sins—every one of us.

My job; my vocation, as one who is called by Christ Himself to stand in the stead and by the command of our Lord and Savior, is to simply direct your eyes and ears to Christ; to His Law and His Gospel; to His call to stop, turn around and recognize Him standing right there in back of you, waiting to pick you up out of your sin and take you back to the safety and life that is Him and His narrow path of salvation. Your Lord loves you too much to let you continue meandering and straying down your own paths and the well-worn paths of this world, wandering away from Him. And that's where all these paths lead. Do not be deceived! Our paths; the paths of all mankind—by nature and apart from Christ—all lead one way: to hell and damnation. However, for our sake

Christ faithfully walked this one-way path into the very depths of hell, death, and degradation, completely and eternally crushing sin, death, and the devil with His all-redeeming death, and then He walked back out—risen and victorious.

And here's something else to consider, there's only one set of footprints that leads into hell and back into heaven—the footprints of your Almighty Lord and Savior. Because of Jesus, that pathway to hell is no longer one-way. His cross serves as an eternal roadblock on the pathway to damnation. Unfortunately, we all too often miss the signs or skirt around the roadblock, don't we? We often seek our own ways and the ways of the world because those ways are so much easier and gratifying to our sinful nature. When this happens, we step off of Christ's narrow path. We foolishly begin stepping down an all-too-well-worn trail of sin, death, and damnation. When on this path, Christ seeks us out. This is the deadly path He picks us up from, tracking us and our sinful wanderings and meanderings, calling out to us with His Word of repentance, seeking to bring us back to Him. When our faithful ears hear these words of Christ, we rightly call out to Him in humble repentance. Can faith respond any other way? It is precisely here—in our humble repentance—that our Lord picks us up, dusts us off, and carries us back to His narrow pathway of righteousness, setting our feet firmly in His footsteps, lighting our footsteps and our path with His life-giving light of the Gospel.

This is the path; these are the footsteps I point you to this morning.

AMEN

*May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*