

Searching for the Footprints of Our Lord Jesus in the Sand  
Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday – John 20:24-29



*“Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps. <sup>22</sup>He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. <sup>23</sup>When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup>He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup>For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”*

Images shape us. Deeply and permanently. An image we have seen once does not simply fade away, but lodges itself behind our eyes from where it continues to influence us. It shapes how we think. It shapes how we feel. Ultimately, it shapes how we act. We live in an age flooded with images. Every day we are inundated with images of war and destruction, of violence and suffering, of people doing terrible things to one another. We look because we have to look. That’s the way the world is. But what do these images do to us? What happens inside us when violence becomes the norm and when the terrifying ceases to terrify?

Role models shape us. This is true for children, but it is equally true for adults. Whoever’s image we keep before our eyes is what we align ourselves with. Whoever’s figure accompanies us is what shapes our hearts. That is exactly what this is about today. Christ presents us with a different image. Not the powerful one who oppresses, or the warrior who triumphs by destroying, but the shepherd. The Good Shepherd who knows, who seeks, who carries, and who gives His life. It is an image that goes just as deep, stays with us just as long, and can transform what we think, want, and do.

The verses from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter above state that, “Christ has left us an example.” The word “example” appears only once in the New Testament and originates from the educational system of that time. Because papyrus was very expensive back then, children could not learn to write on material such as that. Instead, a wax tablet was prepared for them. Unlike papyrus, the wax could be smoothed out repeatedly whenever the child made a mistake. The teacher would trace the letters with a very thin stylus, and students would then only have to trace the outlines of the letters provided. That is precisely where the word “example” used here in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter comes from. It means that Jesus teaches us an entirely new way of writing. He teaches a way of writing that is initially laboriously and childishly imitated but gradually becomes part of our way of life and our habits so that it comes naturally. Our Lord does not force, oppress, or dominate with this way of writing, neither does He seek to manipulate us, but gently shows us how to do it.

Sometimes the gentle outlines that our Lord Jesus sketches out for us are not clearly visible. That is why we search for Him desperately. Where can I find this Jesus? We desperately search, especially in these days filled with such turmoil or when we realize that life has placed a concrete wall in front of us so that we can no longer find our way. We ask ourselves, “What will become of our children now that we’ve lost what used to be consistent?” or “Do I have any future left now that this terrible illness has thrown a wrench in my plans?” The narratives of our world and lives are always loud and relentless. They are hard to ignore. Yet our Lord’s script is gentle. He does not force us but patiently shows us the way and says, “I know you. I also know what future I have planned for you. Just follow my lead. It will be alright!”

Because our Lord’s voice is not loud and He doesn’t force His will upon us, we look for footprints that point to Jesus. When the African bushman sees footprints in the desert, he knows that the tracks point with certainty to someone living who has left their mark in the sand. Like the African bushman, we strain our eyes to see the sandal prints of our Lord Jesus in the sand. When the whole person is missing, we keep

an eye out for anything that will signal His presence. We just want to be near our Lord! Nothing else! We desire this because we are Christians. This starts with the first apostles. They recognized Jesus' sandal prints in the sand, but more than that, they heard His words and realized they wanted to belong to Jesus. At His call, "Follow me!" they went. They wanted nothing more than to just be with Jesus. What moved the disciples to follow Jesus? Jesus wouldn't become a famous movie star, "get rich quick," or promise a life without worries. On the contrary, His life led straight to a miserable and cruel death on the cross. Yet the disciples followed Him of all people. We know the reason from Isaiah 53, which 1<sup>st</sup> Peter quotes here: "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree...[and] by His wounds you have been healed."

It is worth taking a moment to pause and reflect on these words from Isaiah. Clearly, Isaiah has described the significance of Jesus here in minute detail. These words were so profound that even the eunuch from the East stumbled over them at this point and asked, "What does this mean, and who is being spoken of here?" For us, it is equally crucial that we keep Jesus, who died on the cross for our sins, always before our eyes. Especially at a time when we realize we have become sick not only physically but also spiritually, it is important to return to this Shepherd of souls who wants to heal us in both body and spirit.

This is exactly what Jesus wants here on earth! He wants to heal us of our greatest problem. He wants to free us from our bondage to Satan and take away our sin. That is exactly why the Bible repeatedly speaks of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The people to whom 1<sup>st</sup> Peter was written knew all too well what it means to be in bondage. For the most part, they were slaves. They knew what it meant to belong to a master their entire lives. From the moment we are born, we are chained to sin as slaves and cannot free ourselves from it. Being trapped by sin is far worse than illness, worse than living in a foreign country without a passport, and it is even worse than death. Jesus does not merely free us from our earthly cares. He redeems us from sin, Satan, and even death. That is why the disciples followed Him from the start until today.

1<sup>st</sup> Peter describes that we continue to live in the temple Jesus made. Peter writes this because he also knows that we Christians not only have Christ before us, who gives us the blueprint, but we also have Christ *within* us. We live from Him! Through baptism, Jesus lives in us. Through the Holy Spirit, we know that we belong to Him. We are part of His family. Jesus has become flesh and blood for us so that as members of His family we always want to be with Him. The path we walk in Jesus' footsteps is not our own path. It is the path of Jesus Himself. He is the Good Shepherd. We are the sheep.

Some people take offense at the idea that we Christians are compared to sheep. Perhaps because sheep look so stupid. However, sheep can't be all that stupid since they have outlived many other animals over millennia. Sheep are helpless. They have no sharp teeth to defend themselves, they can't run away quickly and hide, and they don't have a shell for protection. Yet they have survived. Perhaps because they were wise enough to seek protection from the shepherd.

We Christians are truly as helpless as sheep: when someone does us harm, we bless them, and we do good to those who hate us! One would think that no community could survive under such conditions. Indeed, for over 2,000 years Christians have been mocked, deceived, persecuted, imprisoned, and tortured. Yet these Christians still exist! Why? Because they are like sheep. They know where the Good Shepherd is, the One who can protect them. They seek His voice wherever it can be heard.

Amen.