

Sermon
May 31, 2020

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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In His Steps
I Peter 2:18-3:12

In 1896 Charles Sheldon, the pastor of the Central Congregational Church in Topeka, Kansas, was inspired as he read this passage of Scripture to preach a new type of sermon for his evening services. He was struck by verse 21 - *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.* He wrote a continuous story, one chapter being given each week, about what would happen in the lives of various people as they tried to live by asking themselves before making a decision - what would Jesus do? The result was the famous book In His Steps which to date has sold more than 50 million copies. If you have read it you are aware of the decisions and choices people made and the impact those decisions had on their lives. If you have never read it I encourage you to read it this summer. If you've read it before get it out and reread it. For there is much in this book to cause us to think especially as we are living through this difficult time in our lives when we are being called to live the Christian life in the midst of a pandemic. It was the inspiration for the craze years ago of the bands that said WWJD. That is the question for us today What would Jesus Do? What does it mean for us to follow in the steps of Jesus - intentionally and faithfully?

First, to follow in his steps we must be aware of the example of Jesus. Every time I read the gospels I am reminded of what an incredible example Jesus is for us and how radical his life was. He worshiped and prayed regularly in the temple, on the hillside and in homes with others and by himself. He was always ready to respond when there was a need even when he was tired and exhausted. He never turned anyone away. He was always willing to explain to the disciples when they had questions. And he was willing to be beaten, mocked and crucified for us. He even stood up to Pilate

and Herod with no fear. They were the authorities and he showed us how to act when accused of a wrong that he had not committed. Peter said it so well: *When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.*

This was the example that Peter used when he said to the slaves *“It is a credit to you if, aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.”* Jesus was aware of God’s will for his life. He judged his actions and decisions by what would be pleasing to God and not humans. By the standards of the world Jesus suffered for his decisions. Therefore, if we are following the example of Jesus we must realize suffering comes with it. One of the great misconceptions of the Christian faith is the belief that once we become a Christian everything will be easy. That my friends is NOT biblical. How could we even think that when Jesus - who suffered and died on a cross for us - is our example?

Peter used the words from the prophet Isaiah to make this point. In Isaiah 53, one of the Servant Songs, we hear words that have come to remind us of Jesus’ life.

*For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases
yet we accounted him stricken
struck down by God and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.*

*All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

We are to follow the example of Jesus. The word that is translated example refers to a sketch, tracing pad or outline used to teach children to write the alphabet. Think about handwriting. Each one is unique - our signatures can be used to identify us. We each write each letter a little differently. We were given an example to practice from as we learned to write but each of us make our writing our own. The example that Jesus gave us was a guideline as we seek to follow in his steps.

As we seek to follow the example of Jesus each of us needs to discern how we will do that in our own life. We each have certain roles to fill and how we follow will be dictated by those roles. I believe that is what Peter was trying to show as he shared three specific roles from their daily lives and gave examples of how they should act. In the established and accepted hierarchal culture of the first century Asia Minor relationships were dictated by a strict “pecking order” both in the household and in the market place.

Each household included a head of the household usually a man but sometimes a woman as we know from the story of Lydia in Acts 16. There was a spouse, children and other relatives present. Strangers were present enjoying the hospitality of the household. Servants, tutors, attendants for children and slaves. The Roman government regarded the household as the foundation of the empire. The household offered stability for food, shelter, education, and a well defined place for every person there. So, what do we learn by looking at the roles Peter chose to highlight?

Peter said that whatever their role, their behavior was dictated by God through the example of Jesus. Their goal was God's approval. The life of a Christian was determined by God and was not a reaction to the conduct or attitude of another. Note that what was said for slaves also applied to wives and husbands. When wives and husbands are mentioned the next phrase in both cases was - *in the same way*. Being aware of God and receiving God's approval for actions was the most important criteria of how to live.

Slaves were to recognize that sometimes when they did what was pleasing to God their masters would not agree. We all know what it is to be held responsible for our mistakes and failures. But sometimes we are blamed for things we do not do. We might be accused of bad motives when our intentions are quite the opposite. Sometimes we are smeared as an opportunist when we were really unselfishly trying to help someone. We all know and have experienced the phrase "no good deed goes unpunished." The guidelines for slaves remind us that what is important is making the effort to try to please God and not ourselves or others. If we suffer for doing what God wants then we are following in his steps.

Wives were to win their husbands by their conduct. It was the purity and reverence of their lives. The inner life - a quiet and gentle spirit - was precious in God's sight. The early church evidently had a good many women who had come to Christ without their husbands approval. They were not submissive in relationship to their faith in Jesus but they were instructed that they could get more with honey than with vinegar. Most of us know that to be true. They were not to use outward beauty or adornment to get attention. Following God with a gentle and quiet spirit was what would cause their husbands to see God in them. Our actions are what win others to Jesus.

Husbands are told to honor their wives just as they would everyone and even the emperor. This was not a put down of wives but a calling of husbands to give their wives respect and care.

Each of these roles required something a little different. Walking in the footsteps of Jesus requires something different of each of us. If we are a husband or a wife we have to make choices depending on our circumstances. As grandparents or caregivers we make other choices. If we are the employer we make different decisions than employees. If we are the supervisor we make different choices than those being supervised. Our roles make a difference in the decisions we make but what is expected is that we will each ask What would Jesus do in this situation?

And Peter summed it all up in verses eight and nine. Hear how Eugene Peterson paraphrased these words in The Message: *Summing up: Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. That goes for all of you, no exceptions. No retaliation. No sharp-tongued sarcasm. Instead, bless—that's your job, to bless. You'll be a blessing and also get a blessing.* Friends, that is what happens when we live in community placing others needs above our own. We become a blessing and we are blessed.

Today is Pentecost Sunday - the day we celebrate as the birthday of the church. The book of Acts says Jesus promised the disciples before he ascended into heaven that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. That power would enable them to become witnesses to the world. They were gathered together on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came upon them with a sound like a rush of a mighty wind and divided tongues rested on them and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. On that day three thousand persons were baptized and the church of Jesus Christ became a movement that would change the world. Why? Because they made a commitment to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. They committed to walk together, to join in a community that would hold them accountable and walk with them on this journey.

Today Kyle has made that same commitment with Devin at his side. And friends, we as the community of faith, have made a commitment to walk with them on this journey. That is the role of

the church to support one another as we seek to walk in his steps.

In Charles Sheldon's book some of the most poignant passages are when those who banded together and made the pledge to walk in his steps gathered once a week after the services to share their experiences, their struggles and to seek counsel from one another. Each week the number who made the pledge grew. Each week the realities of living in his steps became more and more real. The suffering that it often caused was palpable. Jobs were lost, families were estranged. But there also were powerful examples of how God worked to change society and to open eyes to the ways those involved had not truly been living as Christ's disciples. As they became more intentional in following in the steps of Jesus they inherited the blessing of being drawn closer to God.

As Christians we are experiencing something we have never experienced before. We are not the church gathered in one place this day but the church scattered in our homes. But friends, the Holy Spirit is not confined to one place. The winds of the Holy Spirit are moving among us - from home to home - from person to person - empowering us to be the church in the world by following the example of Jesus Christ - living as he lived -following in his steps.

My prayer this day is that we will make a renewed commitment along with Kyle and Devin to ask ourselves in every circumstance - What Would Jesus Do? And then go and do likewise following in His steps.