



**"Footprints"**

**Scripture – John 1:35-51**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, January 14, 2024**

Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous architect, told of a lecture he received at the young age of nine. The lecture sparked his philosophy of life. His no-nonsense uncle took him for a long walk across a snow-covered field. When they reached the other side, his uncle said, "Now, look back at our two sets of tracks. See how your footprints zig and zag from those trees to the cattle, back to the fence then over there where you were throwing sticks? But notice how my path comes straight across, directly to my goal. You should never forget this lesson!" Wright never forgot it. It was a lasting imprint. Wright said, "I determined right then not to miss most things in life, as my uncle had."<sup>1</sup>

How many of us have too much of that uncle in us? We set out on a goal and become so focused on the finish line that we fail to notice the beauty along the way. Or, worse, we march through life wearing blinders and fail to recognize alternative paths that hold the promise of a richer life.

All of us establish routines. Routines give life a needed rhythm; but routines morph into ruts if we become blind to fresh options. Routines can become so cozy that new challenges appear too daunting.

In today's passage, Jesus challenges several individuals to break free from their established patterns to embark on a new adventure.

Picture the scene. John the Baptist and two of his disciples are standing together when Jesus walks nearby. John says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God." The two men traipse away from John and begin walking behind Jesus. Jesus intuitively senses that these two are curious about him, so he pivots and poses a question. It is a question that each of us wrestles with many times in life. He says, "What are you looking for?"

Apologies to Miss Penfield— God rest her soul – for ending a sentence with a preposition. My fifth grade English teacher came down hard on that rule of grammar, but it is right there in the Bible, so don't blame me. Take it up with Jesus!

The author of the Gospel of John wants to hook his readers. In the first chapter of his gospel, when Jesus is recruiting his first followers, he tosses out this question. But do not make the mistake of imagining that it is intended only for his initial disciples. It is designed for anyone who considers following him. What are you looking for?

Sometimes this question sits heavy on our *conscious* mind; sometimes it hides out in our *subconscious*. Sometimes it gnaws on us. We feel unsettled. We perceive a void within us. We ask: "Shouldn't there be more to my life? Is this all I have going?"

If I walked up to you and stuck a microphone out, how would you answer the question: What are you looking for? Someone to love and someone to love you? Security – physical, financial, and emotional security? Relief from your misery? An end to quarreling and dissension? How to be more effective with your child? A purpose great enough to satisfy your hunger? A cure for anxiety or cancer? Serenity of soul? What are you seeking?

Or perhaps you have pushed that question so far back in your mind that you are not aware that you are seeking anything. You just take each day as it comes and do not think about the ways your life could be more.

In our passage, when two men begin following Jesus they wonder if Jesus possesses the wisdom and guidance they seek. Pay close attention to the way Jesus responds to them. He does not attempt to win them over with a well-reasoned argument or a verbal barrage that blows them away. Jesus simply says, "Come along and see for yourself."

As our passage continues, Jesus attracts others: Simon, who becomes Peter, Philip, and then Nathanael. In the initial days of his ministry, Jesus scooped up one loyal disciple after another; but we know it was not always that way. The gospels tell of later encounters where would-be followers backed out of the required commitment. Some were too much in love with their wealth; some were too much in love with themselves, and others were so entrenched in their ways they could not imagine reaching for more.

As he began his ministry, Jesus invited people to become his followers. But in every generation since, Jesus has continued to invite people to follow him. Some respond with the eagerness of Philip. Perhaps the invitation comes at a ripe moment when they are searching; or maybe a desperate time when they will try anything. Either way, they jump on board quickly and are rewarded with the ride of a lifetime.

Others balk at the invitation to follow Jesus. "I'm pretty busy right now. I have other matters garnering my attention. Maybe later." Some are adept at presenting a list of excuses to exempt them from taking action. It is not easy to surrender the safety of the familiar to the call of the unknown. We prefer standing on tested ground to venturing onto clouds of possibility.

A cartoon in the New Yorker had the following caption: "This morning opportunity knocked at my door, but by the time I pushed back the bolt, turned the two locks, unlatched the chain, and shut off the alarm system it was gone."<sup>2</sup>

Some construct so many walls of resistance that one chance after another passes them by.

Bishop Michael Curry points out the obvious. He says, "We are all novices at life. We need someone who knows something about life to show us the way; to show us why we are here." I would add that we need someone to show us how to live a rich and beautiful life. Not a life of glamour. Not a life of luxury. Not a life focused inward. And not a cardboard cut-out of life. In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel, Jesus says, "I have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly." Jesus is the one to show us an authentic life of purpose and joy and hope and love.

The good news is that God does not knock on our door only once. If you have made a commitment to Christ by joining the church, making a financial commitment, and serving in some capacity, you have already taken significant steps in becoming a faithful disciple. Those steps lead to further opportunities. God urges us to respond in Christ-like fashion to the people who come our way. We have opportunities to console a friend who grieves. We have opportunities to stand for a just cause. We have opportunities to be a friend to someone who is lonely. We have opportunities to love and comfort.

Last year, in the Little League southwest regional championship game, Texas was leading Oklahoma three to two. If you've ever watched one of these championship Little League games, you know that these 12-year-olds play like 18-year-olds. They are talented and they are fiercely competitive.

The Texas pitcher was ahead in the count, no balls and two strikes. He wound up and threw a high and tight fastball. It struck the batter in the head. His helmet flew off and the batter crumpled to the ground. The coaches and a medical person rushed to the batter who was sprawled in the dirt. People in the stands jumped to their feet and gasped. After a minute, the batter staggered to his feet and somehow convinced his coach that he was not seriously hurt. He walked, then slowly trotted down to first base. People in the stands cheered for him as they retook their seats.

The next batter stepped up to the plate and waited for the pitcher to deliver his pitch. But the pitcher paused. As he faced the next batter, the reality of what had just happened washed over him. He stood on the mound and tears trickled down his cheeks. He pulled his hat down an inch or so to try to hide his emotions. His teammates stood like statues in their positions waiting for the pitcher to regain his composure. And then something remarkable happened. The batter who had been hit in the head walked to the mound, wrapped his arms around the pitcher, and told him it was alright. He was okay.

Everyone in the stands began to weep at this beautiful act of love and forgiveness. I confess that I could not watch the video without getting misty.

If we embrace the ways of Jesus, we discover that giving really is more satisfying than receiving, that forgiveness can mend fractured relationships, and that amazing things can happen if we respond to others with compassion.

How rewarding could your life become? Follow the way of Jesus and see for yourself.

## NOTES

1. David E. Leininger, *Collected Sermons*.
2. Wiley Stephens, "Patterns, Prisms, and Prisons," on *Day1.org* February 8, 2004.

## Prayers of the People

Eternal God, this day we are mindful that it is easier to adopt the ways of the world than to follow the way of Jesus. We believe we are committed – we sing hymns of praise, utter prayers of thanksgiving, study scripture and pledge our devotion. But when Jesus calls on us to follow him into an unknown future, we waffle. Indecision reigns in our minds and our feet freeze at the threshold. We want to be faithful, but we hesitate to step into new territory. We have grown accustomed to our routines and anxiety rises when Jesus issues a formidable challenge. We balk at his call to lose ourselves in you and to give ourselves for others. Loving God, forgive us for our conditional compassion, and for our measured mercy.

Mighty God, we yearn for the *wisdom* to discern your guidance and for the *willpower* to follow you. May we have clarity of vision to behold signs of your kingdom; open ears to hear your whispers deep within our souls; and receptive hearts to the call of Jesus to faithfully follow him into the places of need.

God of Peace, there are so many places that scream in pain.

Our world is ablaze with war.

Violent crime is too prevalent in our cities.

The sin of racism refuses to die.

Intolerance of other faiths makes many skeptical of any religion.

People with mental illness wander our streets.

Hunger and poverty rob children of a decent life.

Pollution of our planet puts future generations in jeopardy.

The problems are so vast that it is easy to become overwhelmed and too discouraged to even step into the fray.

God of Justice, may we refuse to surrender to hopelessness. Remind us that faithful and determined people working for a righteous cause can overcome tremendous odds. Grant us courage to tame our fears and to defeat despair. Fill us with your Spirit so that we may love without reservation, spread light in dark places, and give ourselves generously in your name.

Now, we unite our voices as one as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, **"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."**