

## **“WALKING WITH AND STAYING ON JESUS”**

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Butler, PA  
January 29, 2017, the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: *“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

-- Micah 6:8, NRSV



Photo Credit: Circe Denyer, “A trail of footprints along a sandy bluff”, at <http://www.publicdomainpictures.net>

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

This is a Sunday in which facts and figures have come to the members of the congregation in the form of a letter mailed out this week outlining the church budget for the New Year 2017. This budget was approved by the Session in December 2016 and is presented to you today for your information and questions at the Annual Congregational meeting immediately following worship this morning.

Jesus spent a lot of time talking about money in his earthly ministry – nearly half of all the parables Jesus told dealt with money and possessions . . . This, too, is a brief stewardship sermon, but I am not going to mention money in very much of it, because the word “stewardship” too often gets locked up in the bank vault, when it is meant to mean so much more. Stewardship includes our money, to be sure, but it really has to do with what we believe about ourselves and what we believe about God’s presence in the middle of our everyday lives. How we respond to God’s love says a lot about what kind of stewards we are.

What is a steward, anyway? The best definition is “one who is a care-taker.” To be a Christian steward is to be a care-taker of your life as a Christian and all the things that make up what it means for you to be you in Jesus Christ.

As we make our way to Trinity each Sunday, Elaine and I pass the intersection of Rt. 68 with Benbrook and Meridian Roads. Traveling as we do from Evans City on 68, there is a directional sign at the corner placed there by Saint Fidelis Roman Catholic church which reads: *“Saint Fidelis Church: A Community of Faithful Stewards.”* I love this sign! This is a motto that should be part of every church’s self-understanding.

I want to begin and end this sermon with music.

I will be playing for you two selections from the multi-talented gospel musician, Eric Bibb, pictured at the left in a photo by Jan Malmström.

Eric Bibb was born in NYC in 1951 to folk-singing parents through whom he was introduced to some of the great artists in both the folk and blues tradition of the times. A Christian, Eric’s first album was



entitled "Spirit and the Blues." The lyrics for these book-ended songs are printed in your bulletin. Please listen now to the first of these songs, a timeless "Negro Spiritual," entitled, "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me."<sup>i</sup>

*I want Jesus to walk with me; I want Jesus to walk with me;  
All along my pilgrim's journey, I want Jesus to walk with me.*

*When I'm in trouble, walk with me; when I'm in trouble, walk with me;  
When my heart is almost breaking, I want Jesus to walk with me.*

*Well, in my trials, walk with me; in my trials walk with me;  
When my head is bowed in sorrow, I want Jesus to walk with me.*

*I want Jesus to walk with me, I want Jesus to walk with me,  
All along my pilgrim's journey, I want Jesus . . . I want Jesus  
. . . I want Jesus, to walk with me.*

Eric sings not only of the spiritual pilgrim's desire for God's presence in his life, but echoes what the prophet Micah urged the people of Israel to do in their everyday lives – to walk humbly with God.

Christian stewardship begins and ends in a commitment to walk humbly with God. Do you remember the old story of "the footprints?" I was sent an updated version of this story some years ago by an elder in a church I once served:

*"Imagine you and the Lord Jesus are walking down the beach together. For much of the way, the Lord's footprints go along steadily, consistently, rarely varying the pace. But your footprints are a disorganized stream of zigzags, starts, stops, turnarounds, circles, departures, and returns. For much of the way, it seems to go like this, but gradually your footprints come more in line with the Lord's, soon paralleling His consistently. You and Jesus are walking as true friends!*

*This seems perfect, but then an interesting thing happens: Your footprints that once etched the sand next to Jesus' are now walking precisely in His steps. Inside His larger footprints are your smaller ones, you and Jesus are becoming one. This goes on for many miles, but gradually you notice another change. The footprints inside the large footprints seem to grow larger. Eventually they disappear altogether. There is only one set of footprints. They have become one.*

*This goes on for a long time, but suddenly the second set of footprints is back. This time it seems even worse! Zigzags all over the place! Stops! Starts! Gashes in the sand! A variable mess of prints! You are amazed and shocked. Your dream ends. Now you pray:*

*'Lord, I understand the first scene, with zigzags and fits. I was a new Christian; I was just learning. But you walked on through the storm and helped me learn to walk with You.'*

*'That is correct.'*

*'And when the smaller footprints were inside of Yours, I was actually learning to walk in Your steps, following You very closely.'*

*'Very good.. You have understood everything so far.'*

*'When the smaller footprints grew and filled in Yours, I suppose that I was becoming like You in every way.'*

*'Precisely.'*

*'So, Lord, was there a regression or something? The footprints separated, and this time it was worse than at first.'*

*There is a pause as the Lord answers, with a smile in His voice. 'You didn't know? It was then that we danced!'<sup>ii</sup>*

If we learn to walk humbly with God, there is room for dancing with him whatever comes our way in this life. And even when we seem unable to walk that closely or well with God – at times when there seems to be no one walking with us at our side, when we feel as if we are walking alone along life's shore, the graceful truth is that the footprints on the sand are those of the Lord as he carries us.

I ask you to commit your life as a care-taker of Christ in you to follow closely in his footsteps and give thanks to God for his presence with you everyday – especially when he is carrying you.

The other point about stewardship I want to remind you about is much like the first because it, too, takes focus. In your care-taking of Christ in you, keep yourself stayed on Jesus. In your waking, in your living, in your doing, keep your self fixed on his love and the rest of life will take its rightful place. I am not telling you to do an easy thing! This is hard to do because

distractions and disruptions occur frequently that can draw our minds and our hearts away from Jesus. That often has us looking elsewhere.

*"A tourist came to close to the edge of the Grand Canyon, lost his footing and plunged over the side, clawing and scratching to save himself. After he went out of sight and just before he fell into space, he encountered a scrubby bush which he desperately grabbed with both hands. Filled with terror, he called out toward heaven, 'Is there anyone up there?' A calm, powerful voice came out of the sky, 'Yes, there is.' The tourist pleaded, 'Can you help me? Can you help me?' The calm voice replied, 'Yes, I probably can. What is your problem?' 'I fell over the cliff and am dangling in space holding to a bush that is about to let go. Please help me.' The voice from above said, 'I'll try. Do you believe?' 'Yes, yes, I believe!' 'Do you have faith?' 'Yes, yes, I have strong faith.' The calm voice said, 'Well, in that case, simply let loose of the bush and everything will turn out fine.' There was a tense pause, then the tourist yelled, 'Is there anyone else up there?'"<sup>iii</sup>*

Truth is, when it comes to the practice of living our lives in Christ – whatever comes -- there is no one else that *can* help us. When Jesus preached his sermon on the mount (cf. Matthew 5:1-12ff), he spoke beatitudes on all who sought him (NOTE: "The Beatitudes" are so called from a Latin word for "blessed" that comes from the original Greek word "makarios" (happy, blessed)): blessed are those who know their need of God; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who are meek; blessed are those who long for righteousness; blessed are those seeking mercy; blessed are those who seek peace; blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. . . Ordinarily, the "blessed" are those whose life circumstance, wealth, prominence, status have brought them into a realm of blessing or happy circumstance, but Jesus turns this idea on its head bringing all those for whom life has been anything but happy or blessed into the realm of the blessed – Jesus is an agent of unprecedented change!

As we fix our minds and hearts on God's love and blessing, our individual worlds can change; we can be changed! And as we are changed, God can work through us to change others!



I encourage you to keep yourself stayed on Jesus as a steward – a care-taker – of God's love. As you do, all the rest of your life will follow as blessing, walking with him, with your heart and mind stayed on Jesus. In the words of gospel musician Eric Bibb:

*I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus!  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah!  
Well, I'm walkin' and talkin' with my mind stayed on Jesus!  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah!  
You can't hate your neighbor with your mind stayed on Jesus!  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah!  
You'll be loving everybody with your mind stayed on Jesus!  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah!  
Well God is the Captain of my mind stayed on Jesus!  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah!  
You know I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus!  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah!*

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Both sets of lyrics quoted in these pages are Traditional Negro Spirituals adapted by Eric Bibb and presented in studio recordings with "The Deacons" and "Needed Time" (musical bandmates and collaborators) in an album entitled "Spirit and the Blues", a production of Earthbeat Records, Redway, CA.

<sup>ii</sup> I received this as an uncited story in a personal email to me years ago. I have since found it cited and quoted numerous times and in slightly subtle variations. One such citation of this story is found at the following URL: <http://www.christinyou.net/pages/footprints.html>.

<sup>iii</sup> From a story in Illustrations Unlimited, edited by James S. Hewitt; Tyndale House Publishers, p. 480.