Sunday, August 27, 1989
WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH YOUR FEET?
John 13:3-15

The Bible has a lot to say about feet. Here are some examples:

Proverbs 4:26:
“Take heed to the path of your feet, then all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.”

Proverbs 19:1-2:
“Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than a man who is perverse in speech and is a fool. It is not good for a man to be without knowledge, and he who makes haste with his feet misses his way.”

Psalm 119:105:
“Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Isaiah 52:7:
“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good tidings, who publish peace.”

Luke 7:36-38:
“One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and sat at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was sitting at the table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet and anointed them with ointment.”

The Bible has a lot to say about feet. And it’s not surprising. In the early days of the human race, our two feet were our only way of getting from one place to another. There were no wheelchairs, and our ancestors had not yet trained animals for riding or for pulling us along on sleds or carts. And later, most people did not have access to animals for transportation. There are still millions of people in the world today who have only their feet for traveling from one place to another.

In the days that Jesus lived, walking was the main form of transportation for human beings. Thus, the care of one’s feet was more crucial than it is today, and the washing of feet at the end of a journey was an important act. In fact, a good host or hostess would provide a servant to carry out this function, or they might do it themselves for their guests. According to the Gospel of John, in that passage read for our scripture reading, Jesus washed the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper out of affection for them and also to give them an example.

So it is not unusual that human feet and the use of them became an important metaphor in religious discourse.

What are you doing with your feet? Whether you are able to physically walk or not, there are some people about whom it is said that they “drag their feet.” By that, we mean that they are reluctant. They are always holding back. They never seem to be able to catch up. They are not

willing to make a decision about anything. They kind of drag themselves through life, always waiting for someone else to pull them along.
Jesus met all kinds of foot-draggers in his time. He would invite them to follow him, to walk in his steps, and all they could do was make excuses or lag behind.

What are you doing with your feet? Are you a foot-dragger?

The opposite extreme of those who drag their feet are those who move too fast with their feet and miss much of what is going on in life. The Book of Proverbs puts it this way: “Those who make haste with their feet miss their way.”
You’ve met people who are always in a hurry. They seem never to walk, but only run through life. Such people’s lives can be compared to taking a trip from Lincoln to Los Angeles by car and driving straight through without stopping except for gasoline and to use the restroom, thereby missing all the scenery along the way.

Some years back, an Episcopal priest named Malcom Boyd published a book of prayers with the title, Are You Running with Me, Jesus? The more I think about it, I believe that title was a mistake and is misleading. I would rather it be, Are You Walking with Me, Jesus?

Then there are those who do not drag their feet, nor are they always running through life, but it seems as if their feet are always pointed or taking them in the wrong direction. In the Book of Proverbs, the writer reminds us: “Take heed to the path of your feet, then all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.”
Be aware always of the direction your life is taking. It’s so easy to wander or drift off course and lose one’s way almost without realizing it. One way to stay on course, on the right path of life, is to follow someone you can trust or to walk with someone who will keep you on the right path.

Here is where following Jesus becomes so important and is one sure way of keeping our feet pointed in the right direction. Early Christians in the New Testament, in fact, were called “Followers of the Way.”

The Psalmist wrote: “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Frequently, God’s word of guidance comes to us through our inner self. So we need to pay attention to that. Often the message will speak to us of our path and how we have strayed from it so that our life is no longer a true expression of our inner self. As I mentioned two weeks ago in the sermon “The Listening Ear,” illness is sometimes one way our inner self gives us a message that we have strayed from the right path, or that our feet are going in the wrong direction. But if we pay attention, God, speaking through our inner self, will keep us from straying off the path as a rider guides a horse.

This story will help. A young woman was returning from high school one day, and a runaway horse with a bridle on sped past the group of young people she was with. The runaway horse stopped at a nearby farmyard for a drink of water. The young woman was able to calm the horse and hopped on its back, and since it had a bridle on, she took hold of the reins and headed the horse back to the highway. She knew the horse would turn in the right direction, but she did not know what the right direction was. The horse trotted along. Now and then it would forget it was on the highway and start into a field. The young woman would pull the reins a bit and call the horse’s attention to the fact that the highway was where he was supposed to be. And finally, about four miles from where the young woman had hopped onto the horse, he

turned into a farmyard, and the farmer said, “So that’s how that critter came back. Where’d you find him?” The young woman replied, “About four miles from here.” The farmer asked, “How did you know the horse should come here?” She said, “I didn’t know. The horse knew. All I did was to keep his attention on the road.”

All of us need God’s help to keep our feet going in the right direction, even though we know the direction. And God does this through others, through the teachings of Jesus and by following his way, and through our inner selves.

The Good News of the Christian Faith is that God will walk with us through life, or perhaps a better way to say it is that God is walking with us all the time. Our problem is that we don’t always want to admit that we need someone to walk with us, so we don’t recognize God as walking with us.

Here’s a story I’ve used before in another sermon, but it fits here also:

One night, a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with God. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. In each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand — one belonging to him and the other to God. When the last scene flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints and noticed that many times along the path there was only one set of footprints in the sand. He also noticed that this happened during the lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him, so he questioned God. “Dear God,” he said, “You told me that once I decided to follow You, You would walk with me all the way, but I noticed that during the most troublesome times of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why, when I needed you the most, you deserted me.” God replied, “My precious child, I would never desert you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”

Unfortunately, there are those who prefer to walk alone. They don’t want to admit they need help from anyone. They don’t want to admit that their feet might go in the wrong direction. They don’t want to admit they limp.

Someone said, “Religion is a crutch,” and I replied, “But who said you don’t limp?”

The Good News is that God walks with us and sometimes carries us and has so made us that we are to walk with each other in this life. That’s the only way to keep from stumbling and falling. And when we do fall, then there is someone to pick us up and help us get going again.

In addition to not dragging our feet through life, not going too fast so that we are always running with our feet, and being sure that our feet are going in the right direction — which means letting God walk with us and walking with others and asking others to walk with us — there’s one more very important point that the Christian faith makes about our feet, and that is that LIFE IS A SERIES OF SMALL STEPS, A MATTER OF PUTTING ONE FOOT FAITHFULLY IN FRONT OF ANOTHER.
Some people try to go through life by making only big leaps. Here’s a person who expects to become a star athlete quickly without going through the patient, day-by-day rigorous training and learning all the fundamentals.

Or here is an individual who wants to become instantly a competent piano player and who wants to skip over all the finger exercises and playing of scales.

Here's another person who joined a company after having received a Master's Degree in Business Administration and is convinced that within a very short period of time, he is deserving of being one of the top executives.

All of us tend to forget that life is a series of small steps, a matter of putting one foot faithfully in front of the other.

In counseling, I meet people who expect dramatic changes in their relationships to take place almost immediately after the onset of counseling. What they forget is that things sometimes may even get worse before they get better. Or parents take John Smeltzer's course in Parent Effectiveness Training, and after completing the eight weeks and putting new skills into practice, they expect quick and dramatic changes in their children's behavior.

True lasting change most frequently takes place slowly, day by day by day, in the same way that our physical growth changes slowly and sometimes almost imperceptibly. Sometimes only in looking back over a period of time are we aware of the amount of change that has taken place. Life is a series of small steps, a matter of putting one foot faithfully in front of the other.

In the very helpful book entitled The Dance of Intimacy, the author Harriet Goldhor Lerner reminds her readers, "Remember that courageous acts of change include, and even require, small and manageable new moves, along with inevitable frustrations and derailments. Trying to do too much will only give us a great excuse to end up doing nothing at all."

This is also true in the area of spiritual growth. To be "born again" is only the first step in a series of many other steps, and it is a matter of putting one foot faithfully in front of the other.

What are you doing with your feet? Amen.