

"Imitate Me?"
Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent
Lectionary Year C
February 28, 2010
Text: Philippians 3:17-4:1
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Sometimes the Apostle Paul seems to go a little too far; he seems to overstep his bounds. No wonder he had enemies in his day. What almost outlandish thing does he say in our epistle lesson for today? He is bold enough to suggest to the Christians in Philippi that they should imitate him, that they should model his behavior, that they should seek to be the kind of Christian he is, that it is his example they should follow.

On the face of it, that assertion seems awfully conceited. "Imitate me," says Paul to the Philippians, and if we were they, we probably would answer rather sarcastically, "Yeah, right."

But before we criticize Paul too much for what appears to be extreme arrogance, let's try to figure out what he is really saying and see if there is not some merit to it for us. If we study the letters of Paul closely, we see that his call to imitate is really the call to join him *in imitating Christ*. In other words, Paul can suggest that the Christians in Philippi imitate him, because he is imitating the earthly Jesus. Paul can ask to be imitated only to the extent that he is imitating Christ.

We are asked to do the same thing, not only by Paul, but by Jesus himself. Jesus says to us, his followers, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15), and "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). We are

to love as Jesus loved, for as he also instructs us, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." He goes on to spell out the dimensions of that love by saying, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13). We also know from his teachings that our love is not just to extend to those who love us, but we are to love our enemies as well (Luke 6:27).

This is radical love—radical because of its *self-giving character*, willing to give up life itself out of love, and radical in its *inclusive character*, willing to love even the most unlovable of people, our enemies and those who hate us and abuse us.

It is not easy to imitate this kind of love, and I am not suggesting it is. It is no small thing to seek to imitate Christ; it is beyond even our best effort. Ultimately it is God alone who makes it possible for us to imitate Christ. That is why Paul talks in this passage about the process of transformation. God's grace transforms us if we will submit ourselves to his will. Through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, God conforms us to the likeness of Christ.

We are to seek to imitate Jesus, but I think it helps in our Christian walk to have good personal examples or role models to imitate. From a practical standpoint, it may be easier to follow Christ by seeking to copy what we see of Christ in the lives of people we know, people we respect and admire in some way, people who seem to be living in Christlike ways.

We have learned how to do most things by imitation. All of us are apprentices when it comes to living; we have been instructed in life by watching or listening to others. As you know, I love to sing, and I

learned to sing by imitation. I stood next to my mother in church and copied the way she sang the alto part to the hymns. I began to think in thirds. Later, when I started singing in the youth choir at church, I learned how to sing tenor by sitting next to Bobby Dennis. Along with Dave Tanner, I played in rock bands in high school, and we practiced hard to imitate the songs playing on the radio. As singers in those bands, we had to try our best to sound as much as possible like the performers of the songs we were covering.

Think about how many things you have learned by watching someone else do them—your mother or grandmother cook, your father or grandfather work on the car, your older sister shop for clothes, your older brother shoot baskets, watching your best friend tie a tie, your cousin dance, your uncle fish, your aunt sew, and on and on. The same holds true for the life of faith. It helps to have role models.

Where do we find role models to imitate? Celebrities certainly may not be worthy of imitation. Politicians let us down in the role model department as well. Even well-known and respected ministers can't always be imitated, as we have learned over the last several years. Maybe we are searching for role models in the wrong places. So let me suggest something else. Look around this community, and look around this church. There are characteristics worthy of imitation exhibited by the people here—your friends, your neighbors, and your fellow church members.

You can find devoted husbands, loving wives, nurturing parents, respectful children, loyal friends. There are people here who model honesty and integrity, creativity and reliability. There are real

professionals in this community and in our church, people with tremendous business expertise and with marvelous relational skills.

Around the city and sitting in our pews are wise people and people with a wealth of valuable experience. There are people who genuinely care about others, people who are loving and who actively work to meet other people's needs. There are people here with wonderful attitudes about life. Look around. What do you see?

I see generous people, people who understand commitment, people who give of themselves, people whose lives reflect values and moral character. There are people around us who live in such a way as to merit imitation. There are role models here for work and play, for family life, for community life, and for church life. You can go a long way toward imitating Christ by imitating some of the examples being set day by day by people who you already know in our city and in our church.

As many of you know, I have officiated three memorial services since Christmas. One was for a woman in a congregation I served previously, but the other two were for prominent members of our own church: Elvin Appleby and Barbara Henry. I have to admit that these two deaths were especially hard for me to deal with, partly because I knew each of them rather well. But another reason that dealing with their loss affected me emotionally like it did is because of the quality of both their lives. Elvin and Barbara were two of the finest people I have ever known. I loved both of them and felt their love for me. It was a pleasure and a joy to be around them. They always brightened my day and lifted my spirits.

And both of them shared something especially important: *each of*

them lived a life worth imitating. At home, at work, at play, at church—they modeled what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and a part of the Body of Christ, the Church. They modeled what it means to act out their faith as a brother or sister, a husband or a wife, a father or mother, a friend or a neighbor or a colleague. In every area of their lives, they showed us what it means to be a disciple, so whether they intended to or not, they invited us to imitate them in their walk with Christ.

So I ask all of us to consider our own example. Is your life worthy of imitation? Is mine? Can we say, as the Apostle Paul did, "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me"? Some of you can, if you're not too modest to do so. Some of us would feel more comfortable echoing the words of the Apostle Eric Burdon of the 60s rock group The Animals, who sang, "So mothers, tell your children not to do what I have done—to live their lives in sin and misery in the House of the Rising Sun."

Christianity is most often "caught" rather than "taught." Can people catch it from watching you? Would you be comfortable having someone chart your worship attendance, looking over your shoulder as you write your checks to the church, observing your daily disciplines of prayer and study, or keeping track of how you give of your time and talents to the church's programs of ministry? Would you be comfortable being watched as you relate to your spouse and children, as you work with your colleagues, as you hang out with your friends?

Is it obvious to others that you are a Christian, that you are a follower of Jesus Christ? I'm not talking about carrying a Bible with you everywhere you go or being able to quote scripture at the drop of a

hat. I'm not referring to acting overly spiritual all the time. I'm not saying that you have to pray in restaurants or pass out tracts door to door or put bumper stickers on your car or listen only to Christian radio stations.

What I'm talking about is what I believe Paul is saying in this text from Philipians. Paul warns about living as "enemies of the cross of Christ." And he goes on to suggest that those people who are such enemies have as their god their own stomachs. In other words, they live directed toward their own gratification, their own satisfaction, their own fulfillment. They are only concerned with having their own needs met. These enemies of the cross are selfish and self-centered. They are only concerned about what is good for them. "What's in it for me?" is all they care about. And, as Paul says, their end is destruction. *That way of life is self-defeating; it goes nowhere but down.*

This is where imitating Christ begins. It begins with turning our eyes toward Jesus and away from our preoccupation with ourselves. It means seeking first the kingdom of God. It means allowing the Holy Spirit to move us beyond our self-absorption to a genuine compassion for the needs and desires of others.

People are looking at you. Your spouse is, your children are, your co-workers are, your customers are, the members of your family are, your friends are, your neighbors are. You are being imitated, whether you realize it or not, whether you want to be or not. I can remember my father saying to me on several occasions when I was growing up, "Do as I say, not as I do." As much as we might want it to, it never really works that way does it? We tend to do as we see others do. And there are

those people within your sphere of influence who are imitating you and the way you think, what you say, and how you behave. And when you are imitated, will it be Christ that is reflected? By imitating you, will others be living according to the example of Jesus? What would Jesus do? Can it be seen easily in what you would do in any given situation?

It was Charles Caleb Colton in the 1820s who wrote that "imitation is the sincerest of flattery." All of us are called to flatter, then, because all of us are called to imitate. We are called to flatter Christ by imitating him. We are called to flatter each other by imitating those Christlike virtues we see exhibited in the saints we have around us. And we are called to live in such a way that others will be inspired to flatter us in the sincerest sense, by imitation.