

“Christianity: An Imitation Process”
Philippians 3:17-4:1 – February 28, 2010

INTRO: It is believed that Paul wrote this letter from prison, where he was awaiting a trial which would lead to his death. Yet, this isn't a depressing letter, but the one that is known as the joyous letter. In it, we find Paul trying to encourage people to live lives faithful to Christ. He's advising a life lived here on earth, that is lived with other-worldly values.

If someone were to wave to you, what would you do? Or give you the sign for I love you, in American Sign language? Or give you a thumbs up? Probably you might wave back at them, or repeat the sign, or give them a thumbs up. We learn by imitating the people around us. “We learn to speak by imitating our parents. We learn to walk by watching older siblings or other family members. Later in life, we create our own ‘unique’ identity by imitating our teenage friends in high school and sticking with our favorite peers in college.” (*Homiletics*, 2/10)

It was interesting to hear how many figure skaters at the Olympics, whose role models were skaters they watched and tried to imitate. And how previous generations of skaters like Dorothy Hamill and Brian Boitano are now mentoring and coaching this new generation of skaters.

And, when we move into adulthood, we may find ourselves searching for persons who are working in the profession we are heading towards, so we can learn from them and imitate some of their good habits. When I was in seminary, I heard about Elam Davies, the preacher at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, right off the magnificent mile. I would often take the El downtown from Evanston, to hear Rev. Davies preach. I didn't know it at the time, but *Time* magazine, in 1979, listed him as a seven star preacher, who made the Bible come alive. He sounded like “poet Dylan Thomas reading Yeats or Richard Burton playing Hamlet. Rev. Davies was born in Wales, and learned his theatrical style of public speaking by watching Welsh preachers.” (*Chicago Sun Times*, 6/14/03)

I personally loved his accent, and his ability to both speak to the intellectual part of us, as well as to our hearts. And I always knew that I was in the presence of someone who knew his craft well, and I could learn from listening and watching.

Paul, who wrote this letter to the people of Philippi, was asking them to watch and listen—to imitate him. He offered himself as an example for them. Paul may have understood his task as that of being a role model. Paul has followed Christ's example, so there's an implicit understanding that to imitate Paul, is imitating Christ. That may sound a bit presumptuous to us, but we need to realize that in his culture, people taught primarily by example. Imitation of the teacher or the master was a teaching principle held in high regard and practiced widely. Paul advises people to mirror his commitment to Christ, that his example could be their way of life also. Paul isn't saying he is perfect. But, “he wants others to share his commitment, to follow the way he is going.” (William Loader) He offers himself as an example in so far as he has honestly tried to live out in his life, the things which he has come to believe.

“The historical context of these verses is set in the third decade of the Christian movement. It was a time when Christians were asking what their faith meant for the character of their lives.”

(Henry Gustafson)

These early Christian followers couldn't go back and read the lives of the saints in the church, or look to the generations of Christians that preceded them, to base their lives on them, because those generations didn't exist yet. This was still a new thing. And the best they could do was to look at Paul or Timothy, and see how they were living out their faith—see how they were trying to imitate Christ's actions. Paul was speaking to new converts in the faith, who understood more if they could see it in action. We take our cues from other people's actions.

Roey Pokrass is showing us what it's like to live an active life at age 80. For more than 30 years, Roey has taught group exercise classes. She currently leads an exercise class in Mequon. The youngest member of the class is 60 years old and Roey is the elder in the group. Every eight weeks the routine changes, and both teacher and students learn new moves to new music. And Roey, who is said to have danced in her playpen, continues to teach the steps to her class. So who did she learn from? Her one grandmother danced on stage and her other grandmother would get up in the morning and exercise. Roey's mother was a dancer who continued dancing until the age of 103. She died at 105. (*Journal Sentinel*, 2/21/10) Hundreds of people have learned from Roey, and have copied the movements she taught them, to help keep active and fit.

We take our clues from the people around us, no matter our age or theirs. An Aesop story tells about a baby crab and his mother. The mother crab and her son went scurrying over the sand. The mother chastised her child: “Stop walking sideways! It’s much more becoming to stroll straight-forward!” And the young crab replied, “I will, Mother dear, just as soon as I see how. Show me the straight way and I’ll walk in it behind you.”

I remember once walking into a woman’s restroom at a department store. I obviously didn’t see all that had transpired before I got there, but I came around the corner to see a bare bottomed little boy whose mother was drying his underwear and slacks at one of the hot-air-hand dryers. She handed him back his underpants and told him he could put them on. He promptly sat down on the not very clean floor. The rest of us standing there cringed and the mother shouted “don’t sit down on that floor.” The little boy told her it was the only way he knew how to get his clothes on. Maybe he had never seen some one standing as they put on their pants, or maybe he had never specifically been taught how to do that.

Not only do we learn from others, but we are responsible for teaching others—for being models and role models for our children, when it comes to life skills as well as how to live out the faith.

Paul was trying to show those early followers the right way to go—a pattern for their lives that would be consistent with the gospel of Christ. He encountered people “whose minds were set on worldly things. They were living lives that were oriented toward themselves rather than toward God and neighbor.” (Brent Waters)

And Paul was trying to direct them to live here in this world, in a way that transforms it into what could be closer to God’s best intention for our world. “Whenever we see people exhibiting a Christ-focused style of faith and life, we would do well to keep our eyes locked on that person.” (Homiletics, 2/10)

I listened to a video clip about the story of Tracy Kidder’s new book, *Strength in What Remains*. It’s the book I’m offering for a discussion time later in April. And it’s the story about a man named Deo, who came to our country from Burundi, with a couple hundred dollars in his pocket, no command of the English language, and really no solid connections here in our country. But, the amazing thing is that Deo managed to encounter at least some plain, ordinary people, who helped him out. He met a baggage handler at JFK who got him through immigration and helped him get around New York for awhile. Deo camped out in abandoned tenements and Central Park, and eked out a living delivering groceries. Sharon McKenna, an ex-contemplative nun, met Deo as he was carrying grocery bags and she asked where he was from. He said “Burundi” and Sharon thought to herself “if you’ve been through that, bless you.” She set out to find him a home. She had friends, Charlie and Nancy Wolf, who lived in Soho. they met Deo and took a leap of faith that changed their lives, inviting Deo to move into their study. He lived with them for SEVEN years, while going to Columbia University and medical school and a life devoted to healing, eventually sharing his gifts with people the country of his birth. Tracy Kidder says that Deo came to our country to “see America” and that we Americans might want to live up to Deo’s dream. Because, fortunately for him and for the rest of us, he encountered some people who exhibited a Christ-focused life. People who weren’t just interested in what life could give to them, but what they could give to others.

What does it mean for us, to think about the couple in Soho, who took in a stranger, and gave him a home for seven years? No, we may not choose to do exactly the same thing, but is there something we can learn from the example they set for us? Is there a way we can imitate that kind of generous hospitality and compassion in our own lives, in a greater way?

I think imitating someone may not necessarily be doing something exactly as they did it, but watching that person, learning from the best they have to teach us, and then putting that learning into practice in our own lives—in our unique ways. We hopefully learn from other followers of Christ, so that we “aren’t a bunch of little Christian clones, but a community of people who resemble Christ.” (Homiletics, 2/10)

Teresa of Avila, back in the 16th century, said: “Christ has no body on earth but ours. Ours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion is to look at the world. Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Ours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.”

We learn from the One we follow, and perhaps from others who follow him. And at our best, here and there, we hop Christ can be seen in our lives in acts of love and compassion.

--Sue Burwell