

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. (Philippians 3:17 N.R.S.V.)

Champion Copy Cats

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

In our lesson from Philippians, Paul urges us to imitate him as he imitates Christ. That may have resonated well in first century Philippi. But it goes somewhat against our modern mind set. We like to think of ourselves as innovators not imitators. In our society it is an insult to be accused of being a “copy cat.” Our heroes are those who “think outside the box.”

I was reading about a certain world famous physicist who in his college days had failed a physics exam. The exam consisted of only one question. “Explain how you could use a barometer to measure the height of a skyscraper?” The obvious answer was to take a reading of barometric pressure at street level and then at the top of the building. From the two different readings it is possible to compute the actual height of the building.

This particular student answered the question by saying that he would go to the top of the building and lower the barometer down on a string to street level, then he would measure the length of the string and thereby determine the height of the building. When the professor failed him, this student appealed to the administration to change the grade because, as he said, his answer was technically correct. The height of the building could be determined in that way.

The administration agreed and ordered the professor to give the student a make up test. So the professor did. But the question was the same one. “How could you determine the height of a skyscraper using a barometer?”

This time the student came up with sixty some ways of using a barometer to determine the height of the building. He could throw the barometer off the top of the building and time it with a stop watch until it shattered on the sidewalk. He could go up the outside of the building, end over end with the barometer, count how many barometer heights there were in the building and then multiply by the height of the barometer. But my favorite one was, he could knock on the door of the building manager’s office and when the manager came to the door say, “I’ll give you this brand new barometer if you’ll tell me the height of this building.”

The student then finished with, but if you want to be boring you could measure the difference

between the barometric pressure at the bottom of the building as compared with the top of the building. That time he passed.

One of the reasons that we value innovators is because the world we live in is changing so fast. Even churches have to struggle with that reality. The struggle we face is how to meet the changing world around us, without losing the central core of the gospel message. There was a time when most people walked to church and churches did not have parking problems. Now we have to find creative ways to get adequate parking. There was a time when it was not possible to put a service on the radio or television because they had not yet been invented. But now this church is on the radio every Sunday and we are able to reach any number of more people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. There was a time when most people in America went to church as a matter of course. Then churches did not have to work very hard at reaching new people. Now in any given city across the country at least 50% of the population does not attend church anywhere. So we have to think about new and creative ways to reach people for Christ.

Yet the bottom line is that we have to do this in ways that do not compromise who we are as Christians, or the good news of Salvation in Jesus Christ. When Paul urges us modern Christians to be imitators of him as he imitates Christ, he is not saying that we have to speak Greek and Aramaic as he did. Nor do we need to walk every where we go or wear first century clothes. What Paul is talking about here is the way we live our lives in obedience to Christ. He is talking about our attitudes, our priorities, and our willingness to make the hard choice for Christ.

Now let me say that as much as we might admire innovators, we are for the most part imitators. And that is not a bad thing, in fact it can be a very good thing indeed. We learn to talk by imitating those around us. If we grow up surrounded by those who speak English, we will speak English. That can come in right handy.

We learn our work ethic from those around us. We also learn our attitudes toward giving, church attendance, and social interaction from those around us. Much of what we learn, we learn without really thinking about it.

In the church I grew up in there was a man named, Jim who had a unique way of greeting people. If you saw him on the other side of the street and waved to him, he would throw his hand in the air and say “hup!” As far as I know he was the only man in town that did that. But here several years ago I met one of Jim’s grown sons on the street. I waved and he threw his arm in the air and said, “hup!”

It is not really a question of whether we will be imitators, it is hard wired into us. The real question is who will we imitate. Most of us imitate our parents to some degree, but we also imitate other people.

Paul’s challenge here is for us to take time to reflect on who it is we are imitating and whether they reflect the image of Christ. Christ is always our prime example and we always go back to Christ. But we also draw from the influence of other Christians.

From time to time in Christian circles we hear the question, “What would Jesus do?” And it is a good question to be asking. When we are faced with a decision or a choice, “What would Jesus do?”

However there may be times when we do not know the answer to that question. Suppose that it is a cold day and pouring the rain, you see someone hitch hiking beside the road. He looks harmless enough but you have your small children in the car with you. What would Jesus do?

A quick reading of the Bible will not give you an answer to that. Jesus never drove a car, he never had to deal with hitch hikers, and he had no young children to raise. So most of us are going to look to those who are spiritually wiser to help us answer questions like that. Paul is offering here to be that wiser spiritual friend. But come to think of it, Paul didn’t drive a car either, or deal with hitch hikers, or struggle to raise young children.

Part of the reason that we gather together as the church is so that we can struggle with such matters together, and so that we can set good examples of Christian living. Those called to positions of leadership within the church bear a heavy responsibility to set a good example for the young in faith. People are watching us.

I had that brought home to me several years ago. My family and I had gone out to eat as we often did after church. We had chosen Pizza Hut that day and when the Pizza arrived, we all bowed our heads and prayed together. As we started eating a stranger approached the table. He said to me, “Aren’t you the pastor of the Beechwood Presbyterian Church?” When I said yes, he continued, “I thought you were, but I waited to see whether you would pray before you ate, just to make sure.”

I can’t remember what he wanted to talk to me about that day, but I do remember being very glad that my family is in the habit of always praying before meals.

But it isn’t just pastors or church leaders who are watched. Every Christian has that responsibility. There is a funny story about a police officer who pulled over a car one day. “What is the matter officer,” said the irrate man, “I know I was not speeding.”

“Well,” said the officer, “I saw you shouting and making rude gestures at the other drivers.”

“Yeah, so that is not illegal.”

“No, it isn’t.” Said the officer, “But I also noticed that you had all those Christian bumper stickers on your car. And I thought the car must be stolen.”

It makes many people uncomfortable to think that they might be role models for others. I remember several years ago when Professional Basketball star Charles Barkly was engaging in some very regrettable behavior on the court. After a game in which Barkly had gotten into several altercations with the officials and opposing players, a reporter asked him, if he wasn’t concerned about what kind of a role model he was being for young kids. Barkly shot back that he was a professional ball player, not anyone’s role model.

That was just wishful thinking on Barkly's part. He was a role model, and kids were going to imitate him whether he liked it or not.

Chances are someone is looking at you this morning as their role model in the faith. If you are a parent that is doubly true, but even if you aren't, you may still be the only Bible that someone ever reads.

You have two choices in this regard. You can shrug your shoulders and declare loudly that you don't want to be a role model. Or you can ask the help of the Holy Spirit that you might become the best role model possible for your children and for those young in the faith. You don't have to go this alone. Other Christians stand ready to help you, and the Holy Spirit stands ready to help you. None of us are perfect role models, but with God's help we can and will get better.

Here's what that might look like.

Let's say that you are a Dad who takes scripture seriously and makes every effort to be obedient to God's word at home, at work, where ever you may be. Your son grows up to have a family of his own. He too seeks to serve God in every area of his life. Together you resemble- not duplicate- the perfect obedience of Jesus the Son, to the God the Father.

Or suppose that the person you admire has all the talent in the world. But she makes every effort to give the glory to God. You imitate her. Together you resemble the humility of Christ.

Churches recite the ancient creeds of the faith each Sunday. You, too, speak and believe these words. In doing so you resemble Christ, from whose lips flowed truth.

If someone asks you what the sermon was about today. Tell them that human beings are hard wired to be imitators. Who are we imitating? Who is imitating us? Paul invites us to be imitators of him as he is imitating Christ. Take a quick glance at what's in front of you and a short look at things behind you. "Whose footsteps are you following in today and how is that working for you?" Take a short look at things behind you. "What is coming from those who are walking in your footsteps?"

If you are convicted by what you see or don't see, remember that with Christ forgiveness is possible. And with Christ positive change and new life is promised. God stands ready to help you. As the music plays, let us go to God in silent prayer.

Amen.