

“Imitators or Impersonators”

Texts: Philippians 2: 1-13

Prayer: Wonderful God, as we shift from hearing your Word read / to hearing your Word proclaimed, / overwhelm us with your Spirit of wisdom / so that we may know you more fully, /love you more passionately, /and follow you more closely / in Jesus’ name. Amen.

I still remember the first communion I received as a child during World Communion Sunday. In the United Methodist tradition, we gathered around and knelt on a rail when we receive the elements from our pastor. At age 11, I was so excited joining the other children kneel on the rail with both hands wide open as we anticipate the snack of the day! A small bread cut in 1X1 inch and grape juice poured in mini glass cups. At that young age, I may have never understood what it means to participate in a communion but for me, it certainly was the highlight of the service which was far better than listening to the long-winded sermon. But I also remember too well how our pastor explained why we are doing communion. Not only did he explain the symbolic meaning of the broken bread as and the wine in form of grape juice but he reminded us that the sacrament of communion is an intentional way of imitating Jesus Christ – of how he lived, how he loved, how he served and how he gathered his friends for a meal.

In our reading today, the apostle Paul wrote a pleading letter to the church in Philippi around 49 CE. Phillippi was a well-known trade city in Macedonia, which, in our modern times, is probably Northeastern Greece. There appears to have been some discord and division in the church and so the apostle writes to encourage humility with a view toward unity. The Philippian church is facing some conflicts about leadership that might endanger the unity of the community. The joy that once energized the Philippian church when Paul first proclaimed the gospel of Christ in their midst is slowly waning. This may have been because of their mindset. At that time and in that culture, the motivation of most people was the pursuit of pride and honour. Doing honorable things like fighting in a war, showing respect to your superiors, and by extension, having contempt for those below you, were how you moved up the ladder of success in the ancient world. It is this pride and honour-seeking mindset, however, that has led to conflict and disunity in the Philippian church. Paul

reminded them that for these behaviors to change, the Philippians were going to have to shift their mindset to one of humility and humbleness. He wrote a powerful hymn reminding them that Jesus did not concern himself with honour and pride and getting ahead. With the use of this hymn, Paul is encouraging the Philippians to imitate the same mindset as Christ and pursue humility rather than fame, pride and honour.

For Philippians to become imitators of Christ, Paul says, they must live as Jesus lived, love and serve others as Jesus did, and to be humble, as Jesus had humbled himself. It is this Christ that Paul lifts up for the people in Philippi as the metric for them to live by. It is the goal for them to strive for. It is a call for them to bring their community closer together and mend wounds and heal any separations that have occurred. Paul pleaded with them to be imitators not impersonators of Christ. He asked them to be transformed inwardly into Christ's way of life and humble mindset so that his Spirit lives in them and in turn will allow them to recognize that they are siblings – sisters and brothers – all God's children, not competitors, conceited people or honour seekers.

The words imitator and impersonator based on Paul's teaching sound synonymous, but they are not. An imitator is one who intentionally and mindfully follows someone's way of being – their values, their convictions, their words and actions. It's like being influenced positively by someone who made an impact on your life. I'm sure most of us had someone who we aspired to be like, someone we looked up to and said, "when I grow up, I'm going to be like ..." —maybe a famous philanthropist or a family member, a teacher, a famous athlete or a compassionate and charismatic leader - someone who inspired us to change.

An impersonator, on the other hand, will go to great lengths to put on the appearance of being someone else and when the show is over, the impersonator goes back to his old self. Talk about Elvis or celebrity impersonators. They tend to go out of their way to be as convincing as possible. They spend a lot of time learning the behaviors and mannerisms of the person they are trying to impersonate. While they can never really be the same as the original, they give it their best effort to emulate them without letting the original change their way of life or way of thinking.

Mahatma Gandhi was reported to have said, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” He is noted to have made this observation as he waged a campaign for justice for his people in India. He evidently had run into or observed impersonators, not imitators of Christ. Comments like these can often be divisive and cause us to take up sides. We can get defensive when something speaks so closely to our heart and names the truth, or at least a part of it. We start to make excuses when we do not want to own up to the truth that we know in our hearts. Those Christians that Gandhi speaks of are the ones that are impersonating more than they are imitating. Remember, impersonators try their hardest to make people believe they are someone that they are not. Yet, it is a life of humility that Christ calls us to imitate, as we encounter others. So, what makes us impersonators and not imitators of Jesus? Rev. Matt Bowman explained that “an impersonator is not trying to be transformed, but is merely going through the motions, tapering off at some level of religious practice that is comfortable but not trying to increase or deepen their faith or intensify their walk with God.” To be imitators of Jesus, to be his reflection, Paul said to strive earnestly to cultivate a humble heart, one that exhibits increasing capacity for empathy and compassion and justice like Jesus.

As followers of Jesus, how do we imitate and reflect his mind, adopting his attitudes in the face of difficult situations, remaining calm yet committed to the ongoing work God is calling us in the world and in each of us individually? When unpleasant things happen, how do we react? How do we respond when faced with a crisis? Do we ask, “What would Jesus do in this situation?” Do we imitate Jesus and reflect on him to others in our actions and in our words? If we are to respond as people seeking to be imitators of Christ, we need to:

Be creators instead of destroyers

Be givers instead of hoarders

Be helpers instead of ignorers.

Be forgivers instead of grudge-holders.

Be comforters instead of agitators.

Be welcomers instead of rejecters.

Be lovers instead of haters.

On this Worldwide Communion Sunday, when we remember that God comes to us in the caring acts of the community gathered, let us find, at this table, strength for our journey. Let's recommit ourselves to be imitators not impersonators of Jesus, welcoming everyone in this table of grace as Jesus taught us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources used:

BCUC Lectionary Group

A Race To the Bottom - Philippians 2:1-13 (July 26, 2020) Rev. Matt Bowman