



“Jesus as Example”

Text: Philippians 3:17—4:1

24 February 2013

2nd Sunday of Lent

Not only was last Monday President’s Day, but a current Academy Award film about Abraham Lincoln is getting a lot of publicity. As our sermon title is “Jesus as Example” why not a story about a president being imitated?

Calvin Coolidge invited some hometown folks to a White House dinner. Because they didn’t know how to behave at such an occasion, they just did what the President did. The time came for serving coffee. The President poured his coffee into a saucer. As soon as the home folk saw it, they did likewise. Next the President poured milk into the saucer. The home folks did likewise. Surely, the next step would be for the President to sip from the saucer. But he didn’t. Instead, he leaned over, put the saucer on the floor and called the cat.

On occasion imitation is risky; yet imitation is how we learn to do many things. James Baldwin remarked, “Children have never been good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.” Paul reminds us of this truth in Philippians 3:17—4:1. Hear our lesson from the Word of God:

17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. 4:1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved (Philippians 3:17—4:1).

The main event in this lesson is when Paul suggests to the Philippians to “join in imitating me.” “Be like me” thinking typically makes us nervous. Yet the imitation theme in Scripture is undeniable. Paul urges the Philippians to imitate him, even



as he himself imitates Christ Jesus. As inheritors of ancient notions about learning and thus about discipleship, both Jesus and the apostle know that true moral and spiritual formation depends on guidance under a master—learning to follow the habits and practices of one who has become proficient in a particular trade or skill. This is what it means to be an apprentice. In fact, this is the precise meaning of the word “disciple:” a learner or pupil. Like all other Christians, therefore, Paul is the pupil of Christ and thus an imitator of him. He calls the Christians at Philippi to do and to be the same (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary; Year C, Volume 2*).

Lent is a time/season of the liturgical/worship year when, although we confess with Paul that “our citizenship is in heaven,” we also recognize that “many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.” As the “funny paper” character Pogo famously said: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Thus in a way Lent is not only a journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter—it is our journey into our lives to discover who we are in Christ. If we are not near Christ, then Lent is a time to examine our lives and discover why not.

Walker Percy’s character in his novel *The Moviegoer* had it right. This character remarked: “The search is what anyone would undertake of he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.” Thus, all of us have a choice: the quest or the despair of the common and unreflective person. And as Plato remarked through his mouthpiece Socrates: “The unexamined life is not worth living” (Platonic Dialogue: *The Apology*). So how do we as Christians examine life?

Paul writes in our lesson today that believers examine life and become Christian by imitation. Imitation simply means to copy or to mimic. Charles Caleb Colton wrote: “Imitation is the sincerest of flattery” (*Lacon*, volume I, no. 183, 1820). Paul urges the Philippians to “join in imitating me.” Although it sounds arrogant, Paul likely meant “become co-imitators of me with Christ” which tracks well with “Be imitators of me, as



I am of Christ” (see: 1 Corinthians 11:1).

Paul knows we learn by watching and seeing others in action. The way we speak, hold our fork, or employ other mannerisms—we learn all these methods of conduct from observation. From our observation of other’s ways of doing things we thus learn our own ways of doing things.

I learned a lesson once at Annual Conference. I saw a pastor who had been a mentor to me. We made lunch plans and I was excited to have him all to myself for an hour because I respected him. He had taught me a lot and I rarely had a chance to see him. I looked forward to our lunch all morning. Coming out of the Conference near the noon hour suddenly a dorky, preacher-type yelled, “Hey, wait! Can I come?” I cringed because I knew that my mentor-friend would say: “Sure, come on, we’ve got room for one more.” I try to imitate his gift for hospitality, but fall far short of his good example.

By contrast to those whose “god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things,” our citizenship is in heaven. This idea of citizenship seem to ask “to whom do you belong” “or who are your people?” Those who claim Texas as home understand the power of state identity. Paul anticipates Augustine by a little fewer than four centuries. Perhaps Augustine’s most influential political writing was *The City of God*. Much of the work is about the origin, maturity, and destiny of two cities: the city of God and the earthly city. At times some call the heavenly city Jerusalem and call the earthly city Rome. Thus Augustine’s book includes a discussion of the relationship between Christian and non-Christian views of life, and between Christianity and secular political life.

Paul reminds believers that they have a choice—either imitate Paul and the other disciples/apostles or follow those who “live as enemies of the cross of Christ.” For Paul the decision is unambiguous. Society as a secular realm may look in a variety of places for citizenship, but believers look to “heaven,” Paul writes to the Philippians, for “a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (3:20).



As Americans we certainly feel as if we live in the best country ever. Paul too suggests that citizenship is key and that people have a choice—the secular realm or Jerusalem, the city of God or the city of humankind. Paul encourages people to choose that city which lasts. The choice for people that live on the human side of divinity is to choose where you want to place your ultimate citizenship. The way to get to heaven is to follow Paul. And Paul gets there by imitating Christ.

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