

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Imitator or Impersonator?”

Philippians 2:1-13

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Whenever I am asked to tell the story of my call to ministry, I usually begin with a story from my youth. When I was a child and had just returned from Sunday worship, I loved to imitate the preacher. Holding the Bible in one hand, I stood in front of a mirror and I would act like a preacher and preach to my reflection. Though I don't know what I was preaching about and for what purpose I was preaching, as a kid somehow, I felt like I was a real preacher. I might have looked like a preacher, but in reality I was not a preacher at all. By doing this preaching to the mirror, I felt that I was imitating the preacher, yet in reality I was just impersonating the preacher. Just as a side note, it turns out that my kids have done the same when both my wife and I have preached. I think there is an important distinction between impersonating and imitating. Paul calls us to imitate Christ in Philippians. What does that mean?

Many of us have seen and heard of impersonators that have acted and dressed in such a way that they look like a famous person whom they have copied and sometimes have even tried to make people believe that they were the real person. Many people have tried to impersonate celebrities like Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson and so on and so forth. It is said that the impersonators of Elvis Presley outnumber impersonators of anyone else in the world. At one point I learned that there were at least 200,000 Elvis tribute artists all over the world. These people could perfect the look and could sound like Elvis in their outside appearance, yet in their inner being they were not Elvis at all. They may look like Elvis to the world but they do not share Elvis' thoughts, frustrations, hopes and dreams. Impersonators can only act and behave exactly as the person whom they impersonate, but they can't really follow and live exactly as the person they pay tribute to, lives or has lived. To be an imitator is something as one commentator (Gilberto Collazo), describes as to have the clear awareness that we only strive to live up to the impossible challenge of being a reflection of the person we look up to. And in this process of imitating, we are aware that we will fall short from the perfect imitation. So, what we understand is that Paul doesn't want the Philippians and us today to be an impersonator of Christ, to pretend to be like Christ and to look perfect as Christ, which is impossible for us. He would instead have us to be an imitator of Christ, that is to try our level best to adopt Christ-like attitudes in every aspect of our life so that people around us would see Christ within us.

Now we might ask, what and how should we imitate Christ? Paul made two big appeals to the Christians in Philippi – unity within the Christian community and individual humility. The call for unity and humility is apparent throughout our text this morning. For Paul, Christian unity is inseparable from humility. In a Christian community it is impossible to be humble enough to “look to the interests of others more than your own” unless we are “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” And it is impossible to be united in any circumstances if we only do things out of our selfish ambitions. As one commentator (Troy Troftgruben) said, “In Paul’s mind, humility is a necessary ingredient for community unity. And true humility is measured, not by low self-evaluation, but by demonstrable concern for others.”

Unity and humility are two characteristics that Jesus Christ demonstrated throughout his life and ministry in this world and that Paul urged the Philippians to emulate. We see that from verses 5-11 famously known as the ‘Christ Hymn,’ Paul argued that though Jesus Christ is equal with God, he did not misuse the position of power he inherited. Instead, Christ out of his humility, emptied himself for the benefit of all. Being in harmony with God, he stepped down from the very nature of God to take the very nature of a servant. He humbled himself not only to be living in human form and to experience what you and I are experiencing here on earth, but faced humiliation, horrendous suffering and even the lowest of the low type of death for the time, crucifixion. He embraced the lowest position rather than the highest, through his self-surrender, self-sacrifice, self-renunciation not for his own credit or honor, but for the salvation of the world. What we see is that Christ out of his humility was able to be of the same mind with God, he was able to look not to his own good, but for the good of all, by surrendering himself to die through crucifixion. As a consequence, God at the right time honored and exalted him and made his name worthy to be praised above all names.

To be honest with you all, living in unity and humility can be easier said than done even for Christians in our world today. The polarized and power-driven world we live in makes it harder to walk humbly before God and to live in unity with one another. Everywhere we look there are many differences, whether cultural and racial differences, economic differences, religious differences, theological differences and so on. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary there are 45,000 Christian denominations all over the world mainly Protestant and independent and more than 200 in the US alone.

Just imagine the vast differences we have in the ways we believe about Christian faith, which in itself can be overwhelming. How can we possibly imagine living in unity with so much difference? Is Paul suggesting to us to see these differences we have as a threat to our unity? I don’t think so, because Paul immediately after talking about unity as being of the same mind, immediately urged the Philippians to “regard others as better than yourself.” Basically, we can achieve unity amidst diversity not by erasing the diversity, but by embracing the differences we

have with one another and having willingness on our part to seek not only our interest but to be open to the needs and interests of others. World Communion Sunday is celebrated to acknowledge the unity we have in Jesus Christ with Christian brothers and sisters who not only look and speak differently than us, but also have a different way of believing. On World Communion Sunday we celebrate that diversity and difference as a gift, and we all choose to come to the same table hosted by Christ as a way of choosing unity.

In the work that my colleague and I are doing with both the students at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and also churches in the country especially when it comes to engaging across cultural differences, we emphasize the importance of “cultural humility”, a concept first introduced in the medical field. To be culturally humble is to acknowledge that you don’t always know everything and get it right and are never done learning and growing. This realization, allows a person or church to have the desire to fix the power imbalance at play in any given situation when engaging with people from different cultures/perspectives and to even seek to build partnerships with people or organizations who advocate for those marginalized by the society. The biggest key to the idea of cultural humility is to never assume you have all the answers or think you have arrived but to remain curious, and continue to listen and observe. This in turn increases a sense of belonging and reduced interpersonal conflict. There is a proverb from western Ethiopian that says, “We can only embrace with empty hands.” We can all agree that if our hands are full, we cannot receive anything from someone else.

Now, as an imitator of Christ we know we are not perfect at all but as we strive to adopt Christ-like attitudes in our day-to-day life, God through God’s abounding love consoles us, through Jesus Christ encourages us and through the Holy Spirit strengthens us. As we received such compassion and sympathy from God, we need to understand that we are not only the receiver but we need to be the giver, too. Christ himself not only received his honor to be God, but he gave up that honor for the sake of humankind. We receive many blessings in our life not only for our own enjoyment, but to be a blessing toward others. It is similar to the act of breathing. We can’t just freely breath in, we also need to freely breathe out. As we inhale every few seconds in our everyday life so also, we need to exhale too. Because what would happen if we just breathed in and not breathed out? We are 100 percent sure that we can’t live like that. Therefore, Paul clearly understands and encourages the Philippians and us too that in order to live a healthy community life both within our own church and with the wider Church of Jesus Christ, we need not only to receive and take care of ourselves but to also give up our gifts and time for others. This is how it works in God’s business we need to give up something in order to receive something, we need to lose in order to gain, we need to serve first in order to be served and we need to be humbled in order to be glorified.

Friends, the world around us and our individualistic culture will pull us to have the spirit of selfish ambition to make us think that it doesn’t matter whether we get along or not with our

neighbor down the road or across the ocean, that we are far better than others in every aspect of life, and that we can be successful in life without giving much attention to the welfare of those around us. What we see in the scripture was that the Philippians wanted to live up to God's standard and God's Law for their own selfish interest to be glorified. The Philippians were *not* following God's commandments so that they could be closer to God, or that God could be glorified. In this way the Philippians were impersonating and not imitating Christ.

But this morning Paul challenges us, who are "In Christ," those who are encouraged by being with Christ, those who find comfort through his love, and those who benefit from what Christ had done to strive toward understanding with each other, to have sympathy for others through humility and to embrace selflessness by holding the needs and interests of others in high regard. We who are in Christ need to reflect the way of life that Christ lived, that is to love and embrace our neighbor whoever they are, out of humility to seek understanding and to consider both the differences and interests of others, to journey alongside our brothers and sisters far and near who are struggling in many ways; not because we have it all or know everything, but that together we may grow and learn as we witness Christ in this world. There is no way for a Christian or a Christian community to get away from that obligation, as long as we are in Christ said Paul, because our Lord Jesus Christ had demonstrated it throughout his life.

In our lives we have all witnessed people or communities that presented themselves as good and loyal Christians, but lacked the depth of true discipleship. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." In many ways some of us could probably relate to this famous quote from Gandhi. Although Gandhi carried the Sermon on the Mount with him most of his life, he never converted to Christianity because he felt Christians did not live like Christ. Friends, on this World Communion Sunday, we are called and challenged this morning by Paul to be imitators of Christ. We are called not to live out of our own selfish motive and to develop our own reputation, but rather we who are in Christ are called to live out of the grace and love we received through Jesus Christ by loving our neighbor both near and far completely and fully. **Amen.**

Phillippians 2:1-13

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.