

“Imitating”

Lent 2019 - “With All Your Heart” – part #2

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Do you remember the last time you played “Simon Says”? It’s a simple yet effective game for children, because it reveals an inherent truth we all know. Everyone needs a role model to follow.

Even if you were not an expert at Simon Says, and I never was, we all can identify real role models we have followed. (Solicit a few answers from the congregation.) Who was your childhood role model? An athlete? An actor or actress? A politician or other leader? A teacher?

I had two excellent role models in junior high. They were Mike and Dave, two of my camp counselors. They were cool, funny guys, who loved Jesus and took great care of us. They were patient and probably let us get away with a few things we shouldn’t have. They were leaders who not only showed they could be trusted, they showed that you could have a great time following Jesus. I wanted to be like them.

This is the second Sunday in Lent, a time of introspection and examining ourselves. Lent is a time to reinforce what we like and change what we don’t like about ourselves. It is all part of returning to God with our whole heart. How can we do that? By looking at role models God places in our lives.

“Simon Says” ironically demonstrates the appeal of role models: we listen to what they say and watch what they do, except, the leader of Simon Says is trying to get us to mess up. A healthy role model earns our respect; that’s why we listen to what they tell us to do. A good role model is a coach who gets us to play at our best.

The Apostle Paul was a great coach to his churches. The majority of the New Testament consists of his letters to his “players” – the Christians in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and his young pastors, Titus and Timothy. In the scripture we read today, he was writing to his people in Philippi. By listening in on his conversation with the Philippians, we, too, can follow his example today.

We start at Phil 3:17, where Paul says, “Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.”

Note, in his approach, Paul was not a hypocrite. He never said, “Do as I say, but not as I do.” He freely admitted all the sins he had committed when persecuting Christians. (See Phil 3:6, Gal 1:13, and Acts 9) But since he met Christ on the road to Damascus, he was a changed man. People could see the difference. So he had no problem telling them to follow his example, and the example of all those who now lived like him.

What did Paul do? For starters, he put Christ first. This is the man who wrote, “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ...” (Phil 3:8) Paul gave up everything to follow Jesus. That’s a good lesson for us to implement.

When Paul says, “Imitate me,” he is really saying, “Imitate the way I follow Jesus.” (1 Cor 4:16) He literally says in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” What kind of example is that? It is the one who puts others before self. Who gives generously. Who is gracious and grateful. One who is slow to anger and quick to forgive. One who values purity and holiness. Paul tells us, “Do the things that I do, and do them without gloating.”

Yet, Paul pointed out that not everyone followed his example. We know this is still true today. Check out verse 18: “For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.” (Phil 3:18)

Enemies of the cross? That’s a strange term. What does it mean to live as an enemy of the cross? There are a few things. First, it means not putting Christ first in our lives, not worshipping him, not following him. But why does Paul specifically mention the cross? Why not just call people enemies of Christ? Well, the cross represents our salvation. As a pastor told me earlier this week, the cross is the symbol of God’s love. Never talk about God’s love without the cross.

God is holy. God is just. And God is love. Those qualities work together for our salvation. The Bible says “In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Eph 1:7)

Those who reject Christ reject his offer of grace. The enemies of the cross of Christ do not love Jesus nor want anything to do with him. Instead of pursuing forgiveness, confession, love and holiness, Paul says, they pursue their stomachs.

Now, I like to eat. Friday night we had dinner with friends – taco salad, corned beef, chicken chili. I enjoyed the food, but I didn’t worship the food. While the meal was nice, the more important thing was being a host for all my friends, many of whom are pastors. They are people with whom I can share more than a meal – I can share communion, prayers, music, and ministry. Good news and bad news. My relationship with them is made great because we all love Jesus. We don’t just get together to fill our stomachs.

To pursue the things of this world is to be an enemy of God. To submit to temptation, shameful things, greed and gluttony, is to reject the gospel, to reject all that the cross offers us. Frankly, it's not nice.

Wow, Pastor. That's not exactly reassuring. In fact, that sounds judgmental, doesn't it?

Yes, which is why we need to pay close attention to Paul's words. Look at verse 18 again. Paul makes these judgments with tears. With compassion. With the desire that people would change. If there is one thing we know about Paul, it is that he longed for people to turn to Christ. It was the motivation for his entire ministry – to preach the good news of the gospel to all, that some might hear it and repent. Think of all the pains that Paul went through: rejection, shipwrecks, imprisonment, beatings; all because he wanted people to know Jesus. You want an example of how to be a Christian without being judgmental? Look to Paul.

When was the last time you were moved to tears because someone rejected Jesus? When was the last time you willingly risked suffering and rejection because you wanted someone to fall in love with Christ and the message of the cross? That's what Paul did. That's the example we should all take to heart.

So how do we do that? How can we follow Paul's example, and the example of others like him? Look again at the last verses of our passage (Phil 3:19-21).

Paul tells us not to set our minds on earthly things, but on things of heaven. Why? Because we are citizens of heaven. On earth, the followers of Christ are immigrants, foreigners, just passing through. Paul tells us that we eagerly await a Savior from heaven, our true homeland.

This does not give us license to be passive in our faith. Certainly Paul was never passive, and he knew where he belonged. As Christians, we can never allow ourselves to become inwardly focused. No one has the right to say, "Well, I'm saved. I'll just go to bide my time here on earth and wait for the real party to start in heaven." If every Christian did that, the whole worldwide church would be dead in one generation, because no one would care enough to proclaim the truth to those who have not yet heard the gospel and have not yet accepted it. Being citizens of heaven means wanting to bring as many people with us as we can!

We are a people of hope, a people who believe in healing and resurrection. We believe in the lordship of Jesus Christ, meaning he is in control of everything! When something in your life is out of whack, ask yourself this question: where is Jesus? Is he the center of your life or on the periphery? If you don't submit fully to Christ, you are living as an enemy to the cross. And that's not what any of us really want.

Paul's final instruction to us is to stand firm. Note how he coaches his words: "My brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord this way, dear friends." (Phil 4:1)

There is no word of condemnation from Paul. Only warning, the way good parents instruct their children or coaches talk to their team. His words are grounded in love and compassion, in honest desire for his churches to experience the best possible blessing they can. This is the fullness of life in Jesus.

Ask yourself this morning: Whom do I follow? Whose advice do I listen to? Whose opinion counts the most in my life? The last major decision I made, who helped me make it?

If you are following Jesus, and following his disciples, the fruit will be evident in your life. Grace, love, forgiveness, generosity, and patience. But if you are following the world, that fruit will become evident, too. According to Paul, you'll get a stomach ache. You will feel guilt and shame. That's not the life Christ has for you.

Jesus said in John 10:10, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Real life. Abundant life. Joyful life.

Instead of living your own life by what you want, what you desire, with yourself as the prime decision maker, follow a better example. Follow Jesus.

Christ died for us. Christ rose again for us. Christ lived the ultimate example of faithfulness for us.

Remember these verses? John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

John 15:13 – "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

John 14:21 – "Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me."

Matthew 7:24 – "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."

This is the pep-talk from your coach. The words from your ultimate role model. The one who walked the talk. Will you follow him?

Let's pray.