

“Imitators in Faith”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Philippians 3:17-4:1

As Presbyterians, we aren't necessarily the deepest of liturgical Christians. While some of us recognize that there are changes in the church's seasons and the meaning behind those different seasons, we aren't all deeply imbued with those theological nuances. Someone in the church last week told me they were asked by one of their neighbors why we were celebrating Ash Wednesday; “You're Presbyterian, aren't you?” her neighbor said, “Isn't that a Catholic thing?” In all honesty, a generation or two ago, I doubt many Presbyterian churches celebrated Ash Wednesday the way we do now, as it did seem to be too similar to the Catholic rites of liturgy. Those attitudes have changed over time, to where we appreciate the meaning behind the symbols, while not placing our faith solely in those symbols.

As I was contemplating this, I couldn't help but be amused by something I read from Casey Thompson, who is a Presbyterian pastor in Memphis, Tennessee. He writes: *In the Protestant tradition in which I serve, the liturgical seasons are inscrutable. They are not yet fully part of our spiritual DNA. If pressed, my congregants might report that Advent or Lent means the purple comes out, Pentecost means we all wear red, and high holy days call for white. Unfortunately, this is akin to suggesting that Republicans are elephants and Democrats are donkeys – the understanding lacks a certain depth of subtlety . . .*

Lent is especially confusing to most people. “Why do we commemorate Jesus in the wilderness if we are on the road to the cross? Did that not happen at the beginning of his ministry?

“Why do we say forty days? It's not forty days. I counted.

“Can I still eat meat? Why do people do that?”

Then there are the two questions that seem to be the crux of everyone's understanding: “Why do we give something up for Lent?” and its counter, “I thought we were supposed to take something on for Lent – not give something up, right?” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 62*).

Whether we identify Lent as a changing of the colors in the sanctuary, or a time to give something up in our individual lives, these weeks leading up to Easter are meant to be a time of preparation, reflection, and examination. It is a season to prepare for Christ's passion and resurrection during Holy Week. It is a season to reflect on our attentiveness to God's voice in our lives of faith. And it is a season

to examine how we – as individuals and as the community of faith – are living out our calling as disciples of our Lord and Savior.

In many ways, this passage from Philippians speaks to these Lenten themes of preparation, reflection, and examination. Paul is writing this letter from prison (1:7), speaking to a church he had founded during his second missionary journey (Acts 16). It is a people he has deep affection for, and he even thanks them at the end of the letter for a gift they sent him by Epaphroditus, one of his disciples (4:18). Throughout this letter, Paul is expressing joy and gratitude for the Philippians' faith, and he constantly is encouraging the believers to, as he says in chapter 2, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (2:4).

It's no wonder, then, that Paul opens this passage by saying, "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us" (3:17). Paul goes so far as to set up a stark contrast between himself and those who would lead the Philippians away from the gospel, calling them "enemies of the cross of Christ." He describes those enemies as ones who are "set on earthly things." I think it's safe to say that Paul was concerned over how the Philippians were living out their faith: were they living for their own interests, or were they living for the interests of others.

Instead of imitating those who are enemies of the cross of Christ, Paul implores the Philippians to imitate him, and live out their faith "according to the example you have in us." It's one of the best biblical examples of mentoring I can recall. Paul is willing to place his life, and the lives of those in the community of faith, as examples of how to faithfully witness to Jesus Christ as Lord. It's through that faithful imitation that believers are reminded that their citizenship is in heaven, and that Christ will "transform the body of our humiliation that it might be conformed to the body of his glory" (3:21). Paul concludes by reaffirming his deep affection for this church, saying: "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" (4:1). It's pretty clear from his words that this church, this fellowship of believers, are incredibly special to Paul.

And he exhorts them to examine how they are living out their faith. One commentator notes: *It is as if Paul says, "Look to those in your midst who live according to the gospel. Let their example, visible in the midst of your community, be a guide for your own life."*

This is not what many of us expect or even want to hear. We prefer to hold up models of faithful living that are more remote, not those who live in the same community with us. The lives of these distant spiritual heroes do not affect us in the same way. We can keep them at a distance . . . or we can let ourselves be influenced individually by them without having to make a commitment of our own lives in community.

*Paul, on the other hand, does not point to any heroes. He points to himself (that is, someone they all know) and to others who live like him. He points to the community as it struggles to live according to the mind that was in Jesus Christ. The community is never a perfect community. It struggles to understand how faith is lived in the world and in the particular local context. Paul holds up that struggle as the way of right living. Engage the messiness of life, he says – not just individually, but as a community. Look toward those in your own community – your neighbor, your friend, maybe even someone you do not particularly like – and learn from the way in which they struggle to live faith in community (Dirk Lange, *ibid*, 65).*

One of the most difficult lessons any of us experience is when we realize that our lives are on display for others to learn from. I have come to recognize that my life – as a parent, as a husband, as a neighbor, as a minister, as a stranger – is not lived in a vacuum. It is lived in relationship with this world. And while there are times I wish I could just be “off” and not be on display, that isn’t how God created me to be. It’s not how God created any of us to be.

I remember when a couple of those “lives” intersected for me. It was maybe three or four years ago, and at home one night at dinner, we were in the midst of a family discussion. I can’t remember the specific topic, but I do remember that at some point, Heather said, “Yeah, Daddy, it’s like what you said last Sunday in your sermon.” And in that moment, I said to myself, “Oh crap. They are actually listening to what I say on Sundays.”

I imagine we all have had our “Oh crap” moments. Those times when a child, a friend, a family member, a church member, or a stranger recounts for us how they were influenced by something we said or did. It could have been a card that was sent at a particularly difficult time. It could have been stopping and honestly asking how they were doing. It could have been interrupting our planned activity and helping in a time of crisis. It could have been observing us doing any of these activities, or speaking God’s love to a fellow brother or sister in Christ.

Those “Oh crap” moments turn into mentoring moments when they are viewed through the eyes of faith. They are mirrors that reflect the cross of Christ when we live for one another, and not for ourselves. They are windows into the heart of God that remind us of whose we are, and that our citizenship does not lie in the boundaries of self-centeredness, but rather in the kingdom of heaven. Those mentoring moments turn into lives of imitation of the one who came not to be served, but to serve.

The funny thing, and the scary thing, about those “Oh crap” moments are that they can also go the opposite way. When we prejudice others with scorn for petty and unfounded reasons – our lives of faith are on display. When we set our priorities based on what’s best

for our self-satisfaction – our lives of faith are on display. When we treat each other within the church with anything less than Christ’s love – our lives of faith are on display. We can mentor our children, our youth, and one another in both the best of ways and the worst of ways. What Paul is calling us to this day and this Lenten Season is to imitate him and others who live according to the gospel in our midst.

Thompson concludes in this way: *In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34), which is not simply a call to self-denial but a call to imitation – day in and day out.*

Interestingly, this call is also why we celebrate the liturgical seasons. It provides the structure by which we imitate the life of Christ. In Advent, we rehearse the story of his birth and await his second coming. In Lent, we travel the wilderness with him and pick up the cross on which he will be crucified. In Easter, we celebrate that death is not the final word but that Christ has the power to “make all things subject to himself” (Phil. 3:21), that he is, in fact, a savior for when our imitation fails (ibid, 66).

In our Lenten journey, may we seek to be imitators of Christ, and in so doing seek to imitate in faith those whose lives are examples of Christ’s love in this world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.