

Imitate Me

There are some readings that comfort; some that encourage; and others that are frankly terrifying. Today's letter from Paul is one of those terrifying lessons. "Imitate me", Paul says. Oh, sure, at first blush, what's the big deal? But chip away at the surface of what he said, and there's plenty of terror to go around. "Imitate me", Paul says, in how I live a life based on some of the most upside down, inside out, ways of living known to humanity. For example, "imitate me" as I love my enemies. As I forgive seven times seventy times. As I am mindful that a lustful look is adultery.

That an angry word is murder. "Imitate me", Paul says, as I live a life committed to giving up; to taking the last seat; to serving one and all. "Imitate me", Paul says to us, and in so many words, says to us to live lives where we in turn can say to others: "imitate me" me in this new life.

The terror, of course, is that when I look at my life, my thoughts, my actions, my behind the scenes attitudes, that I am far from being able to say to anyone: "Imitate me." Even the thought of saying such a thing, in the presence of you, in the presence of God, sends shivers down my spine. One of the quickest ways to get in touch with one's fallenness is to insist on the spotlight shining on one's life, 24 hours a day. Anyone who harbors illusions of perfection will soon become unglued with such scrutiny. Imitate me?! As the valley girls say: OMG!

Those were my first reactions to this letter to the Philippians. But as I sat with it (in the terror of it all) I began to remember Paul too had his share of defects. His whole life he struggled with, and occasionally succumbed, to some unknown temptation that he only referred to as a thorn in his side, a deeply distressing thorn, one that led him to do that which he did not want to do. Paul had a temper. Paul could get pompous. So what's he getting at? Imitate me? **HOLD THAT QUESTION.**

Last week I was listening to an evangelical radio show. I think it was the Focus on the Family show. What I heard was a minister speaking at great length about his relationship with his wife; how strong it is, how central it is, how crucial it is to his faith. He said, in short, that his relationship with his immediate family: wife, children, parents, was the foundation of his Christian faith. That, having spent a lifetime being good to wife and children, he hoped, at judgment, to hear the words: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

My guess is there were an awful lot of people listening to that show, nodding their heads in agreement. I must say, I wasn't one of them. That message left me deeply troubled. It's not that I have anything against immediate families. I don't! But, Jesus did. Take a listen:

“Anyone who comes to me without hating father, mother, wife, children, brother, sisters, yes his own life too, cannot be my disciple. “ Lk 14:28 Or this:

“He was still speaking to the crowds when suddenly his mother and his brothers were standing outside and were anxious to have a word with him.” (Now, you would expect Jesus to take a break and go see what his mom was so anxious about, wouldn’t you?). “But to the man who told him this, Jesus replied: ‘Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? And stretching out his hand toward his disciples he said: “Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of my father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.” Mt. 12:46. And here

“Another to whom he said ‘Follow me’ replied: “Let me go and bury my father first.” But Jesus answered, “Leave the dead to bury their dead, your duty is to go and spread the news of the Kingdom of God.” Lk. 9:59

If some of this surprises you, or upsets you, or intrigues you, I invite you to join our Wednesday Bible Study. The 20 or so who come all agree that there is a great deal of surprise, and wonderful depths to explore in the sacred book. Some of it is even shocking!

What Jesus is saying is not that he is anti-family. What he is saying is that our immediate family is too small to contain who we are meant to be. He recognized that it is in the immediate family where we often learn to distrust those not like us; where slights that occurred years ago fester and are passed from one family member to the next; sometimes one generation to the next; where one member often gains too much authority or control over other members. The family is the place we each of us start from; but it is not where we are called to end up.

A faith that is self-enclosed, wrapped up tightly only in the immediate family, is a faith that is stunted and small. When we water down our faith to something that says: “I need only those closest to me”, we don’t just water it down, we drown the very essence of our faith. What Jesus calls us to, what the imperfect Paul challenges us to in imitating him, is to open our eyes, to clean out our ears, to then see and hear a creation that is shot through with the presence of God.

This, of course, is the transformation Paul was assaulted by. He who hunted down and killed the followers of Jesus, pushed to hunt and kill by his narrow belief that only the Law could save, only the Law expressed God’s will, only the immediate family of the Pharisees had the truth, and so all others were damned; this man Paul, assaulted by the transforming power of God, became the apostle, the messenger, to the nations. To all people. And his word to us today is this: “Imitate me.”

When we huddle together, clinging only to those we know best, we are saying: “I’m afraid of creation.” When we embrace one another, in all of our differences, in all of our strangeness, in all of our oddities, well, that is the imitation Paul invites the Philippians, invites us, to imitate.

In Jesus, God has invaded our world, invaded our lives, and in that invasion, offers each of us the pure gift of being transformed from the man who was once fixated on money to now being fixated on the hidden, yet revealed, Kingdom of God. Transformed from the woman who could not see past her front door and those living in her household to one who embraces every human being as a brother and sister. Transformed from one whose goal is a comfortable retirement playing golf into one who is ready to go wherever the spirit may lead.

The fixation on one’s immediate family, on sticking with one’s own kind, it is the very fixation that had Jesus weeping over the lost city of Jerusalem. Too much class and caste, too few embracing the lost, the outcast, the alien. Too much reliance on power, position and pride. Too little faith in the God who saves. And Jesus wept.

And I wonder, if Jesus stood outside the gates of our town, would he weep for us today as well?

Have you been assaulted by God? Have I? Pray for the assault! Pray for the gift of transformation! For it is in the transformation that Paul’s invitation ripens into the gift that embraces us.

“Imitate me” Paul invites, “as I imitate Christ”, as Christ imitates the Father. For in the imitation, we become who we already are, children of God, created in the very image of God. +amen

david+