

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

# Imitation is the Real Thing

Luke 13: 31-35  
Philippians 3: 17-4:1

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*“Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.”*

Prayer: O holy God, may we hear these words and be inspired by them. May we stand firm in you as we live our lives. Amen.

Do you folks watch ‘reality TV?’ This is a type of programming on television that presents purportedly unscripted dramatic or humorous situations, documents actual events, and usually features ordinary people instead of professional actors. You can watch what the characters are doing in their everyday lives. That’s not such a good thing when you consider shows like “The Osborne's” for example.

If you are using “Twitter,” you can publish your activities online, and everyone connected to you can, in a technological way, follow you around. I’m not so sure that’s a good thing all the time, either.

I know that there are plenty of times that I wouldn’t want others to be aware of my personal behaviors. I mean really...! Sometimes I eat standing up or am gobbling down a sandwich moving from one thing to the next thing. That’s not so

good. Or, sometimes, on occasion, I get home late at night, start to watch TV in my easy chair, and fall asleep. I wake up at 3 in the morning, am so tired that I say to heck with brushing my teeth or changing into my jams... I climb in bed with all my clothes on. Not such a good thing. And, there are the troublesome behaviors, too... I wouldn't want others to know when I get angry and defensive, like when I fight back because I am accused of not remembering something, or when I am only focused on my selfish wants... So, when Paul says, "join in imitating me..." I'm thinking to myself, "hmmm... is this really a good idea...?"

But let's try to understand where Paul is coming from. Even though he has the desire to leave this world and go to be with God in Christ, he knows he must continue working with the new Christians. He tells them to hold onto what they have learned and attained. They have come to understand that in Christ Jesus, the power of God transforms their inner spirit to reflect the qualities of a heavenly citizen. They have grown in the likeness of Christ and in the image of God, which is one and the same thing. So, their behavior reflects this inner transformation.

Paul was powerfully transformed on the inside, and his behavior proved this. So, he says essentially to imitate him. Mimic him. Observe those who are actually imitating him. Reflect the fact that believers in Christ are heavenly citizens first

and foremost, and being citizens of the world is secondary. Imitate me as I follow Christ.”

☑ Paul also encourages the listener NOT to live as those who are against the cross of Christ. They live as citizens of the world first and foremost. Their bodies, their desires, their minds are all set on things not of the heavenly world but of what culture says is important, what their selfish desires say is important. “Don’t imitate them,” is Paul’s message to the Philippians and to us.

Instead, as Christians, the encouragement is for us to imitate Paul as he imitates Christ. Watch Paul as he lives his life dedicated to Jesus. Learn from Paul as he was inspired by Jesus who did the work of God and opened the doors for all people to know of God’s holy love. And, by so doing, we imitate Christ.

Jesus spoke of and acted out God’s fierce love for people. Just like the prophets before him, Jesus spoke to God’s beloved city, Jerusalem, and expressed God’s desire to offer them comfort, to give them protection. The image he used was of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings, shielding her brood from evil or calamity, even unto death.

It’s not unlike the familiar story of a named Ike who recalled the day that his grandfather’s hen house burned to the ground. Ike arrived just in time to help put out the last of the fire. As he and his grandfather sorted through the wreckage, they

came upon one hen lying dead near what had been the door of the hen house. Her top feathers were singed brown by the fire's heat, her neck limp. Ike bent down to pick up the dead bird, and as he did the hen's four chicks came scurrying out from beneath her burnt body. The chicks survived because they were insulated by the shelter of the hen's wings (Sermon Resources for February 28, [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com), retrieved February 23, 2010).

That's the kind of fierce love God has for us. That's the kind of love that we, as Christians, are called to proclaim.

We can proclaim this love as individuals, yes, but let's consider the Church, as Christ's partner in the world right here, right now. Is the Church is called the be like the mother hen in this world? Is the Church called to imitate God's love by opening up its wings and letting people under fire come in and be protected? This metaphor of a big mother hen, all fluffed up "offering warmth and shelter to all kinds of chicks, including orphans, runts, and maybe even a couple of ducks, in the face of the foxes in this world" is a powerful image for the church (Taylor, Barbara Brown, as quoted by Kate Huey, <http://i.ucc.org>, "Strong and Tender," (Feb. 22-28), Weekly Seeds, retrieved February 22, 2010). I think that the Church is called to step in between the evil and calamities of this world and the world's people offering comfort, shelter, and the power of God's transformative holy love.

That's when the miracle occurs. When the Church imitates God's holy love, God's love becomes real. Unlike imitation products that you know are knock-offs—like imitation crab—it may look like crab, smell like crab, taste like crab, but it's not crab. Like imitation flowers... they look real and all, but they are not the real thing.

Contrary to the knock offs, when you imitate God's love, it is still God's love! You mimic love, you become the real thing. As Christians, we are on a lifelong journey of being “conformed to the image” of Jesus (Romans 8:29). That is, we will slowly but surely start acting like him, loving like him, and resembling him. One of the primary ways this happens is through our Holy Spirit-empowered and scripturally influenced imitating of one another. By imitating one another in love, we begin to resemble and reflect the object of our love, God in Jesus Christ.

It's the same kind of thing that happens if you surround yourself with loving people, they will rub off on you. You become more loving. Of course, The contrary is true, too... if you surround yourself with unloving people, mean-spirited people, chances are you will grow toward those tendencies.

Over Christmas break both my college students were home, and in the normal course of everyday conversation, it was no surprise that a little bit of college language would slip in... and that's fairly colorful language, if you get my drift. I

would say, “Hey... what’s with the language...?” “Oh, sorry, Dad... when you live with that kind of language every day, it’s hard not to let it become part of your regular talk.” Yeah, I understand.

When you imitate God’s love, we become God’s love. You mimic God’s spirit living in you, lo and behold, God’s spirit DOES live in you. You practice God’s forgiveness, guess what? Forgiveness becomes the real thing in you. It becomes real in your actions, your thoughts, your attitudes.

It’s amazing how this works! You live as if you’re a citizen of heaven— BINGO! You discover you ARE a citizen of heaven while you are living here, your home away from home.

It’s an amazing love. When you imitate it, it becomes real in you. It becomes our joy to honor God by imitating love, mimicking it, practicing it. As members of Christ’s church, as individuals who love God, in all we do, we honor God. In all we do we honor God. In all we do, let us honor you, O God. Please stand and sing “Amazing Love” as we conclude our worship of God. Amen.