

Titleless
March 8, 2015
Philippians 2:1-11 (The Message)

From childhood on humans are gifted at imitating others. This morning's reading challenges us to reconsider who we are imitating, and reimagine what our imitation should look like.

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care - then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death - and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth - even those long ago dead and buried - will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these wise words.

Let us pray . . . Amazing God, help us to learn from Jesus a genuine humility that grounds and guides our human experience. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

One day a lion, proud of his mastery of the animal kingdom decided to make sure all the other animals knew he was king of the jungle. He was so confident that he bypassed the smaller animals and went straight for the bear.

“Who is the king of the jungle?” the lion asked. The bear replied, “Why, you are, of course.” The lion gave a mighty roar of approval.

Then he asked the tiger, “Who is the king of the jungle?” The tiger quickly responded. “Everyone knows that you are, O mighty lion.”

Next on the list was the elephant. The lion faced the elephant and addressed his question: “Who is the king of the jungle?” The elephant immediately grabbed the lion with his trunk, whirled him around in the air five or six times, and slammed him into a tree. Then he pounded him onto the ground several times, dunked him under water in a nearby lake, and finally threw him on the shore.

The lion – beaten, bruised, and battered – struggled to his feet. He looked at the elephant through sad and bloody eyes and said, “Look, just because you don’t know the answer is no reason to be mean about it.”¹

We can laugh at this story because it is about animals and the way their kingdom seems to work, but when we apply the same concept to our world the result is anything but laughable. Our culture teaches us that we must

- pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps,
- climb the corporate ladder, and
- leap any obstacles life puts in our way.

Our goal is to be the best version of ourselves; we are

- to stand up for ourselves,
- to be a self-made man or woman, and
- to be all that we can be.

And, of course, we are to deny any data and ignore any accusations that suggest someone is better than we are.

In our professional pursuits we dress for the job we want rather than the one we have. We tell the stories of our successes: promotions earned, awards received, honors bestowed. We sound like the only person capable of winning the employee of the year award every single year.

¹ David D. Ireland. *Perfecting Your Purpose: 40 Days to a More Meaningful Life* (Faith Words, 2006), Day 9.

In our personal lives we focus on how wonderful we are and how great our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are. We tell our stories in such a way as to mention our role in shaping everyone's successes. Our world is so beautiful that we are often recognized just for being ourselves and doing what everyone else should do; for example, our home owner's association named our yard display the most creative this past Christmas.

Of course this type of behavior doesn't extend to your pastor . . . or does it? I will admit that earlier in my career when I would catch up with my friends from seminary I was gifted at sounding superior. I managed to go from a nice sized church to a larger one followed by a still larger one.

- I stopped counting members in the hundreds and started numbering them in the thousands.
- I inquired about their educational endeavors so I could remind them I was the first from our group to earn my doctoral degree.
- I also retained the distinction as the one who had served in congregations affiliated with the greatest number of different denominations.

Recognizing that even and perhaps especially within the church humility is not as common as we might expect I came across a story that helped me think more clearly about the topic.

A church realized the importance of humility, so it formed a committee to find the most humble person in the church. Many names were submitted and numerous candidates evaluated. Finally, the committee came to a unanimous decision. They selected a quiet little man who always lived in the background and had never taken credit for anything he had done. They awarded him the "Most Humble" button for his faithful service. However, the next day they had to take it away from him because he pinned it on.²

We need a brain transplant. According to the NRSV – the Bible translation found in the pews – we are to aspire to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus.³ This call to be of "the same mind as Jesus" is not primarily about how we think or what we believe. It is about attitude: how we approach things, our way of being.

² Kent Crockett. *Making Today Count for Eternity* (Multnomah, 2001), p. 122.

³ Philippians 2:5

We need an attitude adjustment. Some of us need to forgo titles for awhile –

- no more “best at this” or
- “doctor that” or
- “guru of the other”.

Some of us need to be recalibrated or reoriented. All of us need to be reminded of the example of Jesus.

Jesus has no interest in acquiring admirers; Jesus is focused on forming followers. He delivers a more radical message than most forms of American Christianity recognize. His way of being in the world must be our model.

He taught that

- the last will be first and
- that those who want to be first must be a servant of all.⁴

He taught that

- getting along is more important than getting ahead and
- that being united is more important than being independent.

In this morning’s Scripture reading we are reminded that Jesus – the one who many understand to be God – didn’t consider equality with God something he should grasp. Instead, he knowingly and willingly set aside his special privileges in order to become fully human.

We too need to set aside our special privileges. The ones others have bestowed on us over the years and the ones we have awarded ourselves.

Remember the lion from the story at the start of this morning’s message? . . . Let me speak frankly to the lion within each of us. While you may want to be king or queen of your own jungle, God invites you and me to something better: to live with humility.

Amen.

⁴ See Mark 9:33-5 and Luke 9:46-48