

CHOSEN BY GOD TO FOLLOW CHRIST

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church on October 20, 2002

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

I found out last week that there's an annual *Hemingway Imitation Contest*. Hemingway was the author of *The Old Man and the Sea* as well as other famous novels. He had a distinctive writing style. He used plain, simple sentences with few adjectives or adverbs. So many writers try to imitate his style ^{that} ~~so~~ a contest was started. The winning entry this year was a short story entitled, *The Old Man and the Flea*. The winner was flown to Milan, Italy and her short story was published in *Hemispheres Magazine*.

They say, "Imitation is the best form of flattery." Young writers imitate Hemingway because he was so good. Young artists imitate the paintings of masters. A youngster plays basketball for hours trying to imitate Michael Jordan. Young girls imitate Britney Spears when they expose their ~~bare~~ midriff. Young people learn adult behavior, not from books, but by imitation. I'm amazed at how children imitate gestures, facial expressions, pronunciation of words, and all sorts of body language from their parents. We also imitate bad behavior. ~~Child abusers often imitate the behavior they received as children. I've seen temper tantrums of~~ some youngsters. Later I meet their parents and discover that they respond to frustrating situations with the same kind of temper tantrum I've observed in their children. Our children imitate bad as well as good behavior.

Our Children, most likely, will imitate our faith or lack of faith in Christ. They will imitate our actions despite our words. That's a scary thought. If we pray before meals, they just may imitate us when they grow up and start their own families. If we have taken them to worship services and Sunday school or participated in ^{service projects like} the CROP walk our children will very likely (but not necessarily) eventually imitate us – in our love for God and neighbor. You may be familiar with a poem I heard years ago. It's not great poetry but it has a good message.

You are writing a gospel
A chapter a day
By the deeds that you do
By the words that you say.
You are writing each day a gospel
Take care that the writing is true
For the only gospel some will read
is the gospel according to you.

We can imitate them as we observe how they serve the Lord in elected offices. We can imitate them as we observe how they care for their employees and fellow workers. We can imitate them as we observe how they deal with conflict and disagreements with others. ^{TP} To our new members I want to say that we have some wonderful people to imitate in our congregation. They aren't perfect people. Get to know them, not only in church but also out of church, in their homes and at their workplaces. You'll discover their rough edges and less desirable traits but you will also begin to imitate traits in their lives that model what it means to follow Christ. You will see their work of love, their labor of love, and their hope in Christ being acted out in their lives and you'll begin to imitate them.

Today we receive new members. I urge you to walk the walk as well as talk the talk. ^{I was talking with...} What we need is not more members but more disciples -- people who follow and imitate Christ. Sign on as disciples and not just members. You will be asked at times to prepare a meal for the family of a young mother just home from the hospital. ^{or to prepare a reception for newer members} Every member of our church is chosen by God to follow Christ. Just as the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the living and true God, each of us has been chosen by God to turn from the ways of sin and to renounce evil and its power in the world. We've been chosen to turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Lord and Savior. We've been chosen to be Christ's faithful disciple obeying his word and showing his love. We've been chosen to be a faithful member of this congregation, to share in its worship and ministry through our prayers and gifts, our study and service, and so fulfill our calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Becoming a faithful member is like learning to be a good swimmer. Some people learn to swim by themselves. They jump in, splash around, and eventually figure out for themselves how to swim. But good swimmers usually have a coach and belong to a team. ^{weaker swimmers learn by imitation from strong swimmers} The team learns from one another how to be a better swimmer. The coach points out what they're doing right and wrong and instruct the person how to swim better. Through practice and imitation they ^{can} become great swimmers. In the same way, most people can figure out for themselves, through reading the Bible and prayer, what they're doing right and wrong and their need of Christ. But to be the best Christian, it's important to be actively involved in a team, the church.

Gracious God, help us who have chosen to follow Christ to be his faithful disciples so that our daily living may be part of the life of your kingdom, and our love be your love reaching out into the life of the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

wrote a Gospel with his deeds as well as words

Saint Paul ~~not only preached the Gospel~~, He lived it and the Thessalonians ~~read it~~ began to imitate him.

Saint Paul tells us that the Thessalonians learned the Christian faith through imitation. "You became First of us - ~~were not going to listen to me~~ ^{hard if} imitators of us and of the Lord," Paul writes. I imagine Paul told the Thessalonians stories about Jesus - how he forgave sinners, healed the sick, welcomed outcasts. Those stories began to transform the Thessalonians as they began to imitate the way Jesus related to people and to God the Father. And they imitated Paul as they observed his work of faith, labor of love, and hope in Christ.

Because of their desire to imitate the Apostles and Christ

Paul goes on to say, "We know that God has chosen you." "We know ... because our message of the ^{Lord say with confidence} gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Paul knew God had chosen them because the Thessalonians, like Paul, didn't simply talk the talk but walked the walk. They imitated Paul's work of faith, labor of love, and hope in Christ. As a result the Thessalonians became an example "to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." Other Christians began to imitate the Thessalonians who were imitating Paul, who was imitating Christ.

We, also, have been chosen by God to follow Christ. Jesus doesn't ask us simply to agree with him. He chooses us to follow him, walking the walk, as well as talking the talk, following him down the narrow path he traveled. Jesus asked for imitation. He wanted followers, not admirers. Dr. Martin Luther King didn't just admire Gandhi's nonviolent resistance. He imitated Gandhi. Discipleship is utterly dependent on our being able to identify examples, saints, people worthy of imitation.

How did we learn the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, the Doxology, and the Gloria Patri? We probably learned as we stood with parents in worship and imitated their words. How do people learn to tithe? They observe their parents or friends writing out a check every pay period to their church or charity and they imitate their actions. How do we learn to seek reconciliation rather than vengeance? We may teach our children not to seek vengeance, but if they see us wreaking vengeance on others - they will most likely imitate or behavior. How do we learn the joy of visiting shut ins? We learn through imitation - imitating parents, friends, and other saints who are imitating Christ.

The people we need to imitate aren't people who lived in the past or far away like Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King. There are people in our congregation who are walking the walk as well as talking the talk.