

When Imitation is More than Flattery

Psalm 130 & Ephesians 4:(17-24) 25 – 5:2

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time/13th August 2006

It's been said, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." Actually this aphorism was first coined in 1820 by the English minister Charles Caleb Colton (1780-1832), a popular writer and personality in his day, known for his pithy remarks and essays, and for being a congenial gossip. He left the church and became a very wealthy French wine merchant, owned an art gallery in Paris, and died in debt after gambling away his fortune at the gaming salons of the Palais-Royal.

Have you noticed we often hear this aphorism as a kind of defense, a retort when caught copying or mimicking, exposed for imitating another's original idea or work? Western society, particularly American culture, values above all else a kind of hyper-individualism that celebrates originality, innovation, and uniqueness. We frown upon imitation. Think of our educational system that doesn't tolerate plagiarism of any kind, a type of educational mortal sin, where all work has to be your own, original. No copying! Working on my doctorate I was under considerable pressure to find one original idea to contribute to the body of knowledge. My doctoral advisor stressed the need to make sure no one else was engaged in a similar kind of research. It had to be unique. Several years ago a minister in Washington, DC, was dismissed when caught plagiarizing sermons written by other preachers downloaded off the internet – mostly Presbyterian preachers, I might add. There's actually a website called The Desperate Preacher page, where ministers can download other's sermons.¹ Don't worry; I'm not guilty of doing this. And if I did, I would tell you. That's why if you've read my sermon texts I've used so many footnotes. Herman Melville (1819-1891) captured this tendency in the American psyche when he said, "...it is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation."

And yet, this obsessive drive for the original, the unique and matchless, being one of a kind, is at odds with a competing propensity at work, as best we can tell, in all of us, and that is the importance of imitation, which is connected with the need to be like everyone else, to fit in. In her book, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford, 2000), Susan Blackmore suggests that our ability to imitate makes humans unique among animals; the perfect mechanism to enhance evolutionary development, those who were good at imitation had a wider arsenal of learned cultural behavior at their disposal, such as learning from others how to make tools and even acquire language. Neuroscientists

¹ www.desperatepreacher.com

have identified mechanisms of imitation in the human brain, a system of mirror neurons that are active both when you see another person act and when you do the same thing yourself, thus allowing humans to learn by imitation. It's amazing to watch young children playing together, where play is a form of learning by copying the actions of the other. Children love to imitate, especially their parents, mimicking action, repeating words and phrases, without really knowing what they mean. Teens seek acceptance from their peers through what is popular, listening to what everyone else is listening to, wearing what everyone else is wearing, buying what everyone is buying – as parents go broke (but it strengthens the economy). Our fascination with Hollywood personalities and athletes is driven by something in us that wants to be like them. As adults, we mimic our mentors, maybe our parents; we try to be like the people whom we respect and value. Yet, despite these deep, ingrained inclinations for imitation, there's something in us that works against this. Roman Caesar and stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius (121-180), could still speak for many in our day when he said, "To refrain from imitation is the last revenge."

Then what do we do with a text like Ephesians 4? How do we hear these words and respond to a text like this? Somehow, I think the apostle Paul had more than flattery in mind when he encouraged his communities to be "imitators of God." This imperative comes after an ethical catalog of sorts, a summary of the kinds of behavior appropriate for Christian communities, which sounds like Paul is basically calling us to be like God. When I hear this text on the surface, "be imitators of God," I don't necessarily hear it as good news, because it seems like an impossible task and a crushing burden setting me up for disappointment and failure. Samuel Johnson (1809-1784), another one for aphorisms, once quipped, "Almost all absurdity of conduct arises from the imitation of those whom we cannot resemble." I think there's a lot of truth in this. Yet, you heard the list: put away every falsehood, speak only the truth; be angry, but sin not; make no room for the devil; stop stealing; work honestly and give your money to the needy; no evil talk; don't grieve the Holy Spirit; let there be no bitterness, no wrath, nor anger, nor wrangling, nor slander, nor malice. But *be imitators of God*. How did *you* feel after hearing this? How can we possibly live up to such a standard?

When we hear demanding texts like this, we need to remember that there's grace here somewhere. Paul is not trying to be difficult with us. In fact, he's seeking our welfare and well-being. He wants us to grow, to mature. He wants us to learn how to be followers of Christ, and to get us there, he's turning to the prevailing pedagogical tool of the Greco-Roman world, the primary method of education of his age, known as *mimesis* or imitation.

When Paul went to school, imitation was the fundamental method of instruction. It took place on many different levels and through many different methods. Students copied, memorized, and recited large tracts of poetry, history, and biography. Behavior, skills, values were learned by mirroring the people who embodied behaviors, skills and values worthy of society. Even architecture, painting, and statues were not for beauty alone, but for educating values. Students were encouraged to find pieces of literature that exemplified notable patterns or forms and then write them out in their copybooks. They would study the *form* and *content* and seek to emulate it. People learned by example.² Did not Yahweh say to the Israelites, “You shall be holy as I am holy” (Leviticus 19:12)? This method was used in Hellenistic Judaism in the study of the Torah and influenced Jesus’ teachings, even Jesus’ injunction at his last meal, “Eat this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19).

Yet, historically, imitation has been de-emphasized in the Protestant tradition, especially in Luther (1483-1546), fearing that it might lead to an emphasis on works at the expense of faith. But it’s tough to make such a claim for the New Testament, because imitation was paramount, especially for Paul. In fact, “a mimesis pattern lies at the heart of New Testament thought. Any theology or ethics of the New Testament should make this foundation point, but few do.”³ As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1).

Does this mean, therefore, that the Christian life consists of simply copying what Jesus did? Just be like Jesus? Mimic him? Become a facsimile of him, a duplication? It’s not that simple. Imitative exercises in Paul’s world were not designed to make everyone the same, the goal was not uniformity or similarity. And this point is the key to the text. Imitation or *mimesis* was designed to produce something new. Students would copy the *form* of an original work, such as a poem, but supply it with new content; or they would copy the *content* of an original work, but supply a new form. The goal of education was not to maintain things as they were, but the goal was to have a command of the patterns, the forms in order to create something new. *The forms and patterns allow for creativity and originality.* This means you have to be careful which forms and patterns you’re imitating, for we run the risk of bad imitation. Can you see now why Paul directs the dysfunctional church at Ephesus to imitate God in Christ, and not the Gentiles, meaning the pagans. In other words, he’s saying to them, “Stop imitating everyone else. Stop being like them.” Look toward God in Christ as the perfect pattern and form for our lives, that when we imitate the kind of life offered in

² www.rhetoric.byu.edu/Pedagogy/Imitation.htm.

³ René Girard on the *imitatio Christi* in *Violence Renounced*, edited by Willard M. Swartley (Pandora Press, 2000), 310-311; www.girardianlectionary.net/res/girard_imitatio.htm.

Jesus, who was imitating his Father, then our lives will become different. They will be first and foremost lives that are defined by the kindness and tender-heartedness of God, which will be shaped by the form of God's forgiveness.

This is how we "learn Christ." But how do we come to know the form and content – how do we come to know this Christ? The Oxford theologian, Paul Fiddes, whose work I respect, affirms the importance of imitation and modeling in the Christian tradition, but insists there's something more at work. For example, the kind of transforming experience that changed Paul's life did not come about because he had good role models, but because he participated in the renewing life of God in Christ. Fiddes says an emphasis on example or modeling "leads to a loss of the sense of the divine mystery and otherness of God" making the Christian life merely a human effort to conform to God.⁴ "It's not enough to urge an imitation of the triune life," he writes.⁵ As we know, such approaches to faith are usually futile and weak and shallow, especially in times of trial. Faith is then reduced to following an ethical "to do" list. Instead, implicit in imitation is *participation*, where through prayer and worship and the work of the church, we find ourselves participating *in God*, drawn into the presence and power of God, where our minds are renewed, "created according to the likeness of God" (Ephesians 4:24) through Christ into something completely new.

It's when we're participating in Christ that we discover the form and content of faith and then are urged to imitate him, not to produce a facsimile of Jesus with your life, but so that with Jesus alive within us we can figure out what it means in our particular lives to love someone, or to be kind and tender-hearted toward another, as God is toward us. We are not called to simply imitate the ministry of Jesus in one way, Fiddes suggests, but the life of Jesus seeks to be "reproduced in our lives in a multiplicity of new ways."⁶ Such imitation allows for originality and innovation. It allows something new to take place. It allows us to live and think and feel in new ways, living lives of healing and renewal, offering hope in a world that seems more adept at imitating violence and destruction and war than the redemptive presence of God.⁷

God doesn't want us to be "cookie-cutter Christians." God wants us to participate in Him through Christ and then imitate him. And when we do, we will discover what love and forgiveness will mean in our individual, particular lives – and

⁴ Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 29.

⁵ Fiddes, 50.

⁶ Fiddes, 51.

⁷ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: "We imitate; and what is imitation but the traveling of the mind?" Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), "Self-Reliance" (1841).

it's going to look different in each of our lives. What we'll find is not a long list of ethical "Thou shall's," but the opportunity to discover in our lives, with our unique circumstances, what it will take to forgive and to be kind and to love. This is what makes our lives "fragrant," sweet incense offered up to God in thanks. It's the kind of life that will make us – *original*, different from everyone else, difficult to fit in – but it just might entice others to want to imitate us or at least be curious about the God in whom we dwell through Jesus Christ. But don't be flattered by that.

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