

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“IMITATING CHRIST”
Matthew 22:34-40
October 26, 2008
8:45 & 11:00 AM Services

What should be the chief characteristic of the person who follows Jesus? How is the true Christian to be identified? Jesus made it abundantly clear what God expects of us. From the center to the circumference the life of faith is to be saturated by love. In the life of Jesus we see exactly what this means.

When asked by the Pharisees which of the laws of Moses was the greatest, Jesus said it was the commandment to love. According to Jesus, the commandment to love has two aspects: love for God and love for other people.

Because “love” is such an overly-used and improperly-used word, Jesus’ call for us to love God and to love other people may sound like the easiest thing in the world. Of course we love God and other people! But it is the most difficult and demanding thing in the world. It takes courage and strength to love as Jesus loved.

Fred Allen, a comedian who died over a half-century ago, said, **“Imitation is the sincerest form of television.”** Apparently television has always had a problem with originality. But the old proverb is true: **“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.”** Children are good examples of this truth. They seldom *listen* to their parents, but they invariably imitate them, often in ways the parents do not recognize unless they are pointed out! We humans are incurable imitators, whether we know it or not. Longshoreman-philosopher Eric Hoffer said, **“When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other.”**

Children learn by imitating. They discover who they are by imitating. They are constantly trying on different identities and roles. This is a large part of what is happening when children play. A little girl, in the course of a day of play, may be an astronaut, a school teacher, a mommy, and the President. A child's imagination is teeming with creativity. We celebrate this aspect of childhood and enjoy it immensely. It is fun to watch a boy pretending to be his favorite super-hero. It is disturbing, however, if the fifty-year-old neighbor next door pays us a visit in a Spider Man costume!

It is not that we cease to be imitators when we become adults. It simply becomes a more subtle process. Anyone who sells anything knows that, to whatever degree we can, we imitate the **“lifestyles of the rich and famous.”** We imitate a certain leadership style. We imitate the innovators and the wheeler-dealers and corporate bosses. Advertisers know all about our fantasies. They realize we would like to play with golf clubs Tiger Woods has endorsed. They know about our infatuation with name brands. They understand who we want to look like, dress like, and act like. We may even adopt the political opinions of people we admire, or attend the same church they do. Our need to imitate is a large part of what keeps the wheels of commerce turning.

A certain amount of this is normal and understandable. Imitation becomes unhealthy, or inappropriate, however, when it is a symptom of personal insecurity or spiritual immaturity. Growing-up means finding our identity. We gradually discover who we are. We come to terms with our own reality. We make peace with who we are

Learning who we are does not mean the end of growth. In fact, resolving the identity crisis may be the beginning of spiritual growth. We know enough about who we are that we can focus on finding more meaningful and fulfilling ways to live. Now we need models of wholeness and maturity, of relational integrity and love. We need the examples of others who have used their gifts in ways that have brought satisfaction and joy. We need heroes of the spirit, people who have taken what they know of themselves and their giftedness and made it an offering to the world and to God. We need mentors, spiritual mentors, who can challenge us, guide us, and encourage us.

Isn't this asking for a lot? It may be, in a world where people say they have many acquaintances but no true friend. But it is something everyone

needs - - a “**com-panion,**” someone who “**suffers with**” us. Someone to mentor us through the deeper waters we face.

The Pharisees came to Jesus, and one of their scribes asked him a question. “**Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?**” The Pharisees considered the laws of Moses to be 613 in number - - 365 prohibitions and 248 positive commandments. They frequently discussed at length the relative importance of these laws. The greatest commandment was thought to be, not the most important law, but the most comprehensive law - - the one that summarized and contained all of the laws. Jesus answered that the “**great**” commandment had two parts, and he quoted from **Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. “Love God, and love your neighbor.”** To do these two things would be to fulfill all that God asks of us.

The Pharisees had a shallow view of God’s truth, believing that its most adequate expression was in laws and rules. They sought to objectify, prioritize, and enforce the truth of God. They were not looking for a living expression of the truth, but were determined to legislate what can only be lived. They valued rules more than relationships. They were preoccupied with measuring goodness. How far can a righteous person walk on the Sabbath? Precisely which activities constitute work on the Sabbath? The Pharisees externalized the will of God in empty rituals, rather than internalizing the spirit of God and becoming whole.

In 1426, Thomas a Kempis gave the world a spiritual classic titled ***The Imitation of Christ***. It has been said that this book has influenced Christianity more than any other except the Bible. It has a mystical tone, exploring the inner life and the value of contemplation, yet is clear in its simplicity. Nevertheless, to imitate Christ seems a daunting, if not impossible, assignment. Where do we begin? Perhaps the best place to begin is in the summary of God’s requirements that Jesus gave to the Pharisees. The most characteristic thing about Jesus was his love of God and his love of all persons. If we truly love God and truly love our neighbors, we will be doing all that God requires. In our own individual ways, we will be imitating Christ.

We must remember, however, that these are not rules, but relational realities. We will discover, too, that they are not as simple as they sound. To love God with our whole being, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, requires that we become new and transformed individuals. But

we can begin where we are, as best we can, with our own understanding of God and with the next person we meet.

The key to learning to love others is to put ourselves in their place. Then it takes very little thought to know what love requires. All we have to do is imagine ourselves on the receiving end and we will know how to love people in need.

What is the essence of our humanity? What is the key ingredient in human pursuits and relationships? Plato identified reason as life's greatest good. Kant found the essence of human nature in duty. Rousseau discovered the meaning of life in beauty. But Jesus saw that life has its source, its meaning, and its crowning goodness in love. ***"We love, because God first loved us."*** (1 John 4:19)

And this morning I would love to be your pastor. I would love for Park Hill to be your church.