

Imitators

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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I

I was having a bad morning. I was running late, and I was in a hurry to get out the door. I had an armful of packages that I was supposed to drop at the post office on my way to dropping off my young toddler sons at preschool, and as I tried to hold onto the packages and open the van door and get my sons boosted into their car seats, I lost my grip on the packages, and they went tumbling down the driveway.

And in my frustration and exasperation, in front of my two young sons, I uttered out loud a phrase that very clearly broke the third commandment, which if you'll recall, is, "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." My young sons wisely didn't say anything, but they sat there blinking at me with those big blue eyes.

The next morning, I was in a much better mood, and I had completely forgotten about the previous day's incident. As I was helping my young sons climb up into the van, one of them accidentally dropped his backpack, and it went crashing onto the driveway. Before I could say anything, in perfect diction and pacing, he repeated verbatim the breach of the third commandment that I had displayed to him the day before. Fearful that he might do the same thing in front of someone else, I tried to explain to him that such language was not how we talk in our house. And of course, he said, "Why not, Daddy? You do."

And of course, he was right. Just the day before, I had done right in front of him exactly the thing I was now asking him not to do. So much of parenting and teaching often involves imitation. An adult demonstrates a skill or a concept, and then invites the child to imitate what has just been modeled. And clearly, my son had become an expert at imitating his dad, warts and all.

II

I'm mindful that in these strange days, all of us are under varying degrees of stress and pressure. All of us are experiencing grief and loss of some kind. And as we turn the page on another month of this crisis, I want you to hear from me that if you feel the need to scream or utter a few choice words or find some other expression of your anger and fear and frustration, that's perfectly OK if it helps relieve some of the stress. Be gentle with yourselves.

But I'm also mindful that our children and our neighbors and our coworkers and our friends are observing us, even if it's only through Zoom calls and what we post on our social media feeds or how we talk about this crisis. There's a saying that the Christian faith is more caught than taught, and in my life, I have found that to be true. I have learned as much, if not more, about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ

from men and women of faith – family members and youth advisors and choir directors and coaches and friends - who have modeled it for me – than I have learned in books or in a classroom. None of these role models are or were perfect Christians, to be sure, but by imitating some of what they have modeled for me, I have learned more about what it means to follow Jesus Christ in this broken, hurting world of ours.

III

And that brings us to our story from Acts and 1 Thessalonians this morning. As Carol reminded us two weeks ago, the Book of Acts can rightfully be read as Volume 2 of the Gospel According to Luke. And in the first chapter of Acts, the resurrected Christ tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem and then spreading out to the ends of the earth.

The story that Carol read for us from Chapter 17 involves a man named Paul, who, although he wasn't one of the original 12 disciples, nevertheless became the most prolific church planter, preacher, and theologian of the first century. The Book of Acts recalls several of Paul's journeys wherein he traveled throughout the Mediterranean world preaching, teaching, and planting churches.

One such place in which Paul planted a church was in the city of Thessalonica, a seaport on the Aegean sea on the northern coast of modern-day Greece. As you heard from Carol's reading of Acts 17, Paul's preaching there created an uproar, and he and his companions were accused by the mob of, among other things, "acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus." Paul and his companions were spirited away before the mob could lay hold of them, and they continued their missionary journey.

Paul was a prolific writer of letters, and after arriving safely in the next town, Paul took it upon himself to write a letter to the Christians who had been so kind and hospitable to him in Thessalonica. That letter has been preserved and handed down to us through the years and we now know it as the Book of First Thessalonians. So with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you

not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

IV

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers.

I've been thinking about imitators this week, about role models, about examples, especially those who have been through times of trial. Whether you know it or not, my friend, you are a role model for somebody in these times of trial in which you are living. Whether you know it or not, my friend, you are an example for somebody in these strange days. Whether you know it or not, my friend, someone is listening to how you speak, they're watching how you act, they're observing everything about you -- not in a big brother, surveillance state kind of way, but in a way that says, "This person claims to follow Jesus of Nazareth. They claim that Jesus is the one true king, the one who is worth living and dying for. Does it seem to make a difference in their lives? Does it change the way that they offer welcome and hospitality to strangers? Does it change the way they speak about people with whom they disagree? Does it appear to offer hope in the midst of chaos?"

They may not be asking these questions directly, my friend, but they're there. Is your witness to Jesus Christ in these times of trial and suffering one worth imitating?

V

This year, of course, is also the bicentennial year for our church. I've been thinking this week about those women and men of faith who filled these pews years ago – about pastors and elders and Sunday School teachers – and about the legacy of faith in Jesus Christ that they have left for us. It was by no means perfect – for there is no such thing as a perfect Christian, just a forgiven one. But I think about them quite a bit these days, especially those saints who lived through the pandemic of 1918. Everyone with a living memory of that time has long since joined the Church Triumphant, of course, but I wonder what advice and counsel they might offer us?

And so I've also been thinking about the generations that God-willing will come after us in this place. When they look back at 2020, when they look back at us, what will they say about us? No doubt, they'll say, "They got some things wrong. They didn't do it perfectly."

But if we are faithful in our testimony, if we might pattern our speech and actions and very lives after the model set before us in Jesus Christ, perhaps they'll say, "Thanks be to God for their faith, a faith that enabled them to turn from idols and to serve the living and true God." And that will be legacy enough.

Thanks be to God. Amen.