

The Call to Imitate

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Philippians 3:17-4:1

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I want to start today by asking us to imagine something; imagine that one day I got behind the pulpit and I said this. “Friends, I know that all of you may struggle from time to time with knowing what the right thing to do is. I know that all of you may wonder from time to time how it is that you can be the best Christian, or to be a moral and spiritual inspiration to others. But have no fear, if you are ever wondering about these things, then all you have to do is to do all the things that I do. If you are ever in a situation in which you don’t know what to do, ask yourself ‘What would Rich do?’ And then, do that. Imitate me, my friends, because if you imitate me, you can never go wrong.”

Now, if I said that at worst you might think I’ve lost my mind, and at best you might say that I was a bit arrogant, that I lacked humility and my ordination to the ministry must have finally gone to my head.

But isn’t it funny, that this seems to be what Paul says in this passage of scripture in which he is addressing the church in Philippi? “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us, Paul says. Do what I do, or at the very least do what we do.”

“How arrogant! How vain! How morally superior!” we must say.

But on the other hand, you might hear Paul’s words that say imitate me, or imitate us, and say to yourself maybe Paul isn’t suggesting that he is morally superior to anyone, maybe he doesn’t mean that he thinks of himself as any less of a sinner than anyone else, but what he means is imitate the good things that I do, imitate the things I do in their essentials. Let’s say

that I'm a dance instructor and I am trying to show you how to dance the tango, and I say do this and then I proceed to make all the fluid and graceful motions of the tango. Do I have to assume that I am perfect before I ask you to imitate me? Do I have to assume that I can't possibly make a mistake in dancing before I ask you to imitate me? No, of course not. Or imagine if you were that I am teaching you a foreign language and I say repeat after me, or imagine that as I have been doing a lot lately as I teach someone to drive, I say watch me. In the language case, must I assume that I am perfectly fluent, that I could never make a grammatical error? Or as a driving instructor do I assume that I am the perfect driver before I say watch me? No and in fact that is always a dangerous thing to assume. In all three cases, what I am assuming is not that I am perfect, but what I am assuming is that you and I have a relationship between expert and novice, and that the novice should imitate the expert.

Well, maybe that doesn't help much, maybe you say Rich, I get that Paul may not be calling himself morally perfect, or calling himself sinless, but I just don't think one Christian should ever say to another imitate me, the only person who would ever have a right to say that is Jesus, not someone like Paul.

Fair enough. But I also think there is a great value to what Paul is telling people to do, and amid too great a concern with how arrogant it may be of him to tell people to imitate him, we may just miss out on that value.

You see, one of my favorite questions that I get as a pastor is what I like to call Is it a sin? Is it a sin? Pastor, if my sister knows that her fetus will be born with a serious birth defect and so she decides to have an abortion, is that a sin? Pastor, If my father is never going to make it out of the hospital and I decide to take him off life support, is that a sin? Pastor, If I keep a secret

from my spouse, because I know that the truth will be hurtful to him or her, is that a sin? And I suppose there is nothing wrong with asking such questions. But here's what I want people to understand when they ask Is it a sin. You can live your life carefully avoiding all those things that I might call a sin, and you could live your life carefully avoiding everything the bible ever says is a sin, and yet be a thoroughly awful person. You can keep all the rules and still be absolutely disgusting. And it there any mystery as to why that is? Can't you tell me all the steps to dancing the Tango, and I can come out looking like a disaster, or you can say, do this, and you can come out looking as graceful as Fred Astaire. Can't I tell you all the steps to how to drive a car and you can run off the road or I can say "Watch me!" and you can develop into someone that others would feel safe riding with. Can't I give you a book about how to speak Spanish, and you will never learn it that way, or I can say "Repeat after me" and then you will slowly become more and more proficient. You can know all the steps of a process and still do things in the wrong way. Just like you can carefully avoid sin all your life, but you still do the right thing in the wrong way, or at the wrong time, or with an impure heart.

And that is why I think that something is rather remarkable about life that I thought about rather recently, is that I can't think of a single person, whether they are Christian or Jewish or Atheist or what have you, I can't think of a single person who ever woke up in the morning and said I want to live my life following this set of rules, but I know plenty of people who have woken up in the morning and said, I want to live my life like this person or like that person. I have heard many times and I'm sure you have too about people who say they want to be like Jesus. That's great, I think, but trying to be like Jesus can only take you so far. Jesus was the savior of the world and none of us can be the savior of the world. We just aren't wired that

way, and the world already has the only savior it will ever need. But Paul tells us we can be like one of his disciples. We can imitate all the fluid motions of the dance, instead of just going through all the mechanical steps.

Each semester, when I am teaching my students I like to ask them something. I like to ask them, who in your life is someone you admire, who is someone who inspires you, who is your hero. And I tell them right off that they're not allowed to say Jesus because that's too easy. If they can only say Jesus that just shows they haven't ever thought about it. Who is the hero in your life or in history who makes you say there's someone who knows what life is all about, and while maybe you wouldn't do everything in the exact way that they do it, otherwise how could you be yourself, you think they set the right style, you think they set the right pattern, you think they dance the right steps. And I tell them here's why this matters. Here's why this is important. Because if you cannot name a single person for whom you say "That's my hero!" I can promise you that no one will ever say that you are their hero.

And think about that. Think about people who were heroes of millions of people all over the world. Think about Gandhi or Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa. Can you imagine Margaret Bourke White interviewing Gandhi and asking him who inspires him and Gandhi replying "I can't think of anyone." Can you imagine Mike Wallace asking Martin Luther King who inspires him and having King say "I can't think of anyone." Can you imagine Chris Wallace asking Mother Teresa, whom do you admire Mother Teresa, and Mother Teresa shrugging her shoulders. Of course you can't. Of course you can't. Anyone in this world who has lived a life that inspired other people is someone who themselves has been inspired by other people. They are people who have recognized that there are certain patterns, certain dance moves worth

imitating. They are people who have recognized that not every dance in life is as good as every other dance.

I want to tell you a story of what happened to me one time and then I am done. When I was interning at a church one time I was teaching a Sunday school class. It was a middle school class and there was a middle school boy there who was constantly, and I mean constantly saying really inappropriate things. I mean things that were so inappropriate, I can't even give you an idea of what he was saying let alone quote him directly and he was doing it constantly. And so I would say things like Stop That and That's Enough of That, but it didn't get any better, so finally in my frustration I pulled the kid aside and I said you either need to stop doing this or I am going to ask you not to come back to the class. Now, before you say anything, I agree that I could have handled that better. I probably should have called a parent first and tried to figure out what was going on with the kid first. But I remember after I talked to the kid, I got an angry phone call from the mother who said to me and I quote, "You don't have the right to tell my son what to do."

I said "I don't have the right to tell your son what to do?" Ma'am your son is eleven and he's making it impossible to have Sunday school for everyone else."

And then she said "You don't have a right to tell my son what to do and I want you to apologize to my son."

Well, I said, "No, ma'am I am afraid that's not going to happen."

She said "You either apologize to my son, or I'll have you fired."

I said "Ma'am I'm sorry you have chosen to act that way, but go right ahead." Well, she didn't have me fired, but she and her son left the church and they did not come back. But how

about that, I didn't have a right to tell her son, her eleven year old son what to do. Is that where we are now. Are we so fiercely independent and so insistent on doing things our own way that we even think you can't tell an eleven year old what to do when he's being disruptive.

You may think it is arrogant of Paul to say imitate me. You may think it is arrogant to say do what I am doing. But what about the arrogance of saying I don't have anything to learn from anyone who has gone before me. What about the arrogance of saying people who have reflected on how to live for thousands upon thousands of years have nothing to teach me about life. What about the arrogance of saying people who have been reading and studying the bible for thousands of years have nothing to teach me.

Imitate me, Paul says, don't just follow a set of rules but do as I am doing, because there aren't just rules out there about what to do, but there are ways of living that show us how to do it, and in what way to do it, and at what time to do it. During this season of Lent as we reflect on what it means to live disciplined and holy lives, perhaps it is a good time to ask ourselves who our heroes are, who our she-roes are, who are the people who have danced the dances, and lived in those patterns that did not make them perfect, but made their lives worth imitating.