



Sermons from

“Imitation Time”

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Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; 2: 9-14a

Imitation, as the old saying goes, is the highest form of flattery. Imitation can also be unflattering. I'm quite certain most of us can go a long time before we need to be the focus of a Saturday Night Live skit, or be skewered by Stephen Colbert or John Stewart on the Daily Show.

For individual Christians and for churches, ideally, imitation is a response to God's love and a display of meaningful discipleship.

This morning's New Testament scripture reading points us toward models of discipleship worthy of imitation. First Thessalonians tells of a church and its members in a land far away and a time long ago. At the time of the writing of this letter in the first century, Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman-ruled Macedonia. Situated at the northwestern tip of the Aegean Sea in what is modern-day Greece, Thessalonica was important for its location, for it was accessible by land and sea. Today, what is important for us about that far away land and long ago time are the words of the Apostle Paul, who wrote the letter, and the faithfulness of the Christians in that city at that time.

Every age of Christians has had to contend with the Apostle Paul's raw emotions toward people and about situations. His words leap off the pages of scripture. In this instance, words full of praise for the faithful Thessalonians ring out. He starts his letter by telling his readers that he, along with co-workers Silvanus and Timothy, are full of admiration and respect for their work of faith, their labor of love and their steadfastness of hope in Christ. We, reading these words today, hear how the church responded well to the preaching and the ministry of Paul and Silvanus and Timothy. They had, in Paul's words, become imitators of those who had planted their church and of the Lord. We also know that their faithfulness had become an example to all the believers in neighboring Macedonia and in Achaia.

In summary, what we know about that early church is that they were an authentic Christian community. They were faithful and loving. They were full of hope. They shared the good news, and they shared a common life together. They were Church, in the best sense of the word.

The relevance for us today is that the Thessalonians exhibited best practices of what it meant to be a community of faith. Likewise, we who live in the land of the “Leaders and the Best” do well to know who and what deserve imitation and who and what do not.

For a church to fulfill its high calling as the body of Christ, two factors must be present, and best practices must surround these key factors. The factors for fulfillment are these. The first is the energizing power of the gospel. For a church to be all it can be, the gospel--the good news of the saving love of Jesus Christ--must be felt so keenly that its members are compelled to share it with others in word and deed.

The second factor, the second ingredient, is that the members of the body need to share themselves with each other. They must be in relationship with each other. They must become a community. And the way to become a community is to imitate Christian practices that lead to ever more faithful discipleship.

How did the Thessalonian Church reach its high calling? And how can Ann Arbor First Presbyterian do the same?

At the heart of the Thessalonian Christians' ability to become faithful disciples was their willingness to give up the worship of idols. The Roman Empire was not very threatened by any group if they paid their taxes and worshiped their gods. It was when Christians followed the one true God as proclaimed by Jesus and his followers that the emperors got nervous.

To me, a life of discipleship starts with focus. The focal point is God. This puts Jesus in the center of the picture as he reveals God to us. For one's life to be worthy of being called a life of Christian discipleship, that life can not be lived as a split screen. There must be a single focus, and that focus must be on God's will and way as revealed by Christ. For one to live a Christian life of discipleship, one must work as though everything depends on one's best effort and pray as though everything depends on God—because both are true.

Likewise, a church must be focused on its calling, to both share the gospel and to live out a healthy, whole, full, rich life together in community. To find the way to the focus we at First Presbyterian need as a body of Christ, we do well to begin where the Apostle Paul started in addressing the Thessalonians. First, he and his co-workers gave thanks to God for the congregation. Next, they told the members of the church that they prayed for them constantly. Then they praised them for their work of faith, their labor of love and their steadfastness of hope, and for their focus on giving up ideals and imitating Christian practices.

This Stewardship Season, let me tell you, dear friends, that we, your pastors, do the same. Whether we have had knowledge of this church 40 years, as I have, or 40 weeks, which others of my colleagues have, I want you to know we are thankful for the opportunity to serve at this place and at this time. We are thankful because daily we see great things happening and the potential for even more incredibly significant ministry to take place, both here at 1432 Washtenaw and throughout the community and the world.

I mentioned Stewardship Season. Next Sunday our month long emphasis on giving ends on Commitment Sunday. It is the day we will dedicate our giving and service

commitments for next year. It is the day we will bring back our bulbs for planting on the church grounds.

Many churches and pastors do not see Stewardship Season and Commitment Sunday as the triumphant, joy-filled time they can be. I am not one of those pastors. Why? Because the gospel is good news. It is a story of faith, hope and love, and through our stewardship of everything we have, we have the opportunity to share this good news with others.

Why else? Because the people I resonate most with are church people, and I can share this experience with them, meaning you. I can be in partnership with others who focus on God as the True North of their lives, and on helping and serving others, and on giving. And because I have my idols that distract my focus on God—maybe you do too—I know I need the church as an institution and you as my community for me to be any kind of Christian disciple.

I also mentioned a 40 year relationship with First Presbyterian. It has taken a variety of forms, from beginning my ministry here to serving a sister church in the presbytery for a decade as its pastor to presently serving here once again. The forms of the relationship are not what I wish to emphasize. What has been and continues to be all important for me is that this church has shared and is sharing the gospel in faithful ways. Yes, of course from the pulpit. And also yes to our children and youth in Sunday School and through youth groups; and yes, through a vital music ministry; and yes, near and far, through our missions and the incredible ministries you faithful people live out in the areas of pastoral care and so many other ways.

The way you and I continue to benefit from this church's many ministries, and the way they are made available for others, is for us to support them. Likewise, the only way a vital community of faith can be the body of Christ in all its fullness is for all of us to support the church as fully as we can.

When speaking of matters of stewardship, some pastors edify but do not specify. Let me not be numbered in that category. Let me be specific about the church's financial needs and what you can do about them. I speak as one who signs off on the financial requests that come through the church's Finance Office.

First, the ministries of this church are many, varied, amazing, and heartwarming. Those who have any part in the finances of the church are always looking for ways to squeeze a nickel until the buffalo grins. A more contemporary way to say this is that we try to stretch our dollars as far as they can go. Second, in tough times in the country and especially in our state, First Presbyterian has held its own. But, and you knew this was coming, and I say it unapologetically, if we as a church are going to minister to the fullest of our potential, more money is necessary. The stewardship campaign material has laid this out.

How does this happen? We start with more giving units giving. Everyone counts. No gift is too small. Next, those now giving give more. How does this happen? Let me

set forth three ways: First, give regularly. This is a tangible reminder of your role in supporting First Presbyterian, and this act should give you joy. Second, give a proportion of your income on the way to giving a tithe or double tithe or whatever you are capable of. By giving proportionally, you will work toward growing in giving. Third, grow in giving. Try and give more and see what happens. My experience is I feel more joy and blessings. Growth in giving might take getting rid of idols—did I say chocolate or triple mocha frappachino? But you will know new blessings.

I feel profound joy and thanksgiving each year as Commitment Sunday approaches for this reason: I have the opportunity to say thank you to God for the gospel and for this community in which I can live out my Christian discipleship.

This annual ritual is, of course, important for the church for all the practical reasons. Budgets have to be set, people are needed to claim ministries so volunteer opportunities can be fulfilled.

But there is another dimension for me. Making a financial commitment to First Presbyterian is an intimate best practice, an act of praise and thanksgiving. Commitment Sunday allows me to imitate the best practices mothers and fathers in the faith here in this church showed me years ago. Thankfully, day by day, many of you are showing me the same faithfulness daily.

By example, people in this church have showed me how to give God thanks for the blessings of life, how to tithe, how to grow in my giving, and how to feel a sense of joy in giving. And by imitating them and their practices, I have felt an ever greater sense of belonging to God and to this body of Christ.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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