

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon for October 25, 2020
21st Sunday after Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: The Imitation of Christ

Those who follow me can never walk in darkness, says the Lord.

By these words, Christ urges us to mould our lives and characters in the image of his, if we wish to be truly enlightened and freed from all blindness of heart. . . . All who wish to understand and to savour the words of Christ to the full must try to make their whole life conform to the pattern of Christ's life. - Thomas A. Kempis, *"The Imitation of Christ"*

1st LESSON: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (NRSV)

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.

2nd LESSON: Matthew 22:34-46 (NRSV)

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?"

They said to him, "The son of David."

He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

*'The LORD said to my lord,
'Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet''*

If David thus calls him LORD, how can he be his son?"

No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

REFLECTION: “Christian Cognitive Behavioural Therapy”

Before we start into the body of the sermon, I want to tell you a story and ask you a question. A few weeks ago, I heard a woman on CBC radio mention how, one day, in her local grocery store she noticed that the checkout clerk was not wearing her mask. She had a mask, but it was dangling from her ear.

The woman watched as a lady approached the cashier. When the lady noticed that the cashier was not wearing her mask, she panicked, and deftly guided her cart to another checkout line. The woman behind her chose to go forward, although she was clearly perturbed as well. She stood as far away from the cashier as possible, and refused to engage with the cashier. As she left the store, she doused herself with hand sanitizer. Then, the woman watched a man choose to go to this cashier for service. When this man noticed that the cashier was not wearing her mask, he got angry, raised his voice, and demanded that the cashier put her mask on.

All three of these people were upset, and yet they reacted in different ways. The first woman fled, the second woman numbed, and the man in this story attacked.

If you were at that checkout line, what would you have done?

Now, back to the sermon.

For the next few weeks, we are going to leave the Israelites wandering in the desert, and look at some of Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, and the final, famous teachings of Jesus to his disciples.

While we do this, however, I don’t want us to forget the Israelites. I don’t want us to forget that we ourselves are still wandering, still finding our way, and imagining new ways of being.

It is, I think, helpful to remember this, when we approach the parables and teachings of Jesus. Sometimes we tend to think of Jesus’ parables and teachings in a simple manner. We can dumb them down. We make them into children’s stories rather like a fable by Aesop, each concluding with a very clear moral instruction.

Some of Jesus’ parables are like this – especially the stories he tells to crowds during his public ministry. But there are also parables and stories he tells, especially in this section of Matthew, that are anything but clear. They seem clear. And yet, they befuddle. They unbalance us. They send us wandering. They get us thinking about new ways of being. They force us to question our way.

The parables and teaching we are going to be looking at, are parables and teaching of Jesus that occur towards the end of his ministry, when the plot to kill Jesus is underfoot, and the shadows are gathering. They occur far from Galilee and the sunny days of the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus nears Jerusalem and faces the cross. They are proclaimed against the backdrop of Jesus’ understanding that things are going to get very bad, before they get any better. And, because Jesus knows that his immediate followers are suffering with him, and facing the same uncertain road that he is, these teachings and parables are addressed to them. These are passion parables. They are parables that wrestle with the question of how to do God’s will, even though God’s will seems to be difficult.

Our reading for today takes place in the courtyard of the temple of Jerusalem, for example. There are crowds listening. But what is really happening is that Jesus is being questioned by religious authorities. He is being examined. And, the authorities are looking for any reason they can discover, to condemn Jesus. The Pharisees have decided to trap Jesus with his words, and have sent their disciples to him along with some Herodians. Jesus is unable to perjure himself. Then the Sadducees come to him. Again, Jesus is unable to perjure himself. Then, hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together, and decided to send one of them to Jesus – not just a disciple – and this one asks Jesus: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

This is, of course, a cornerstone of Jesus’ teaching. Elsewhere in Jesus’ ministry, we find its echo in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And, in the many stories of Jesus meeting with

people from different cultures, sexes, classes, and sexualities, and his willingness to offer grace to these others, we also find this teaching.

Here, however, as Jesus is pitted against the avid minds of the religious authorities, we have this teaching at its most terse.

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus sticks to his guns. In the face of persecution, Jesus stays on message. He stays true to himself. He does not betray himself. He does not conform, or adapt, or falter. He does not say what he thinks he needs to say in order to save himself. And, in the process, Jesus astonishes the authorities. No one can find fault with his replies, and from that day on, no more authorities dared to ask Jesus any more questions, until his arrest and trial.

In the face of uncertainty. During a cross-examination with his life itself at stake. Adrenaline pumping through his veins, his heart racing, his face red, sweat drenching his brow, his breath shallow. Tempted to fight back. Tempted to flee. Tempted to just go numb and stand there.

We have all been there, haven't we? We know what it is like.

Jesus stays on message. And the message is not just some carefully crafted soundbite that someone in marketing has drummed up for just this occasion. He sticks to his truth. He refuses to put on a mask, or appear to be something other than what he is.

It's remarkable, isn't it? How often, when we are under pressure, do we cave in, do we say what we think will save us, do we pivot, and say what we think our audience wants us to hear?

It is this ability to stay on message—to stay focused on his truth, and refuse to deviate from it—that is so remarkable about Jesus. It is what makes him such a compelling leader.

And, it is this ability of the Thessalonians to imitate Christ's steadfastness in the face of persecution that Paul notices and praises in our reading from first Thessalonians today. Paul and Timothy and Silas, writes in their greeting to the community, “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 labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“You have become imitators of us and of the Lord,” the letter goes on to say, “for in spite of persecution . . . you became an example to all the believers in your area.”

In their difficult time, the Thessalonians were able to imitate Jesus. And this imitation was life changing. It was precisely what they needed to resist what was not life giving – from all the tempting idols of their time – and embrace the God who offers all that is living and true.

As we wander in our time. As we negotiate this pandemic, racism, neo-fascism, climate change, and economic trouble, the temptation to panic, and forget who we are as Christians is huge.

I catch glimpses of us doing just this from time to time.

When we are upset, for instance, as we have every right to be from time to time, we tend to follow one of three patterns of behaviour. In our story about the checkout counter clerk who was not wearing a mask, we can easily see ourselves in one of the three responses that the customers made. Some of us deal with problems and protect ourselves by running away from them. Some of us deal with problems by disengaging, going through the motions, and numbing ourselves. And some of us get angry and choose to fight. I see us, and I see myself, behaving in these ways often.

None of these responses to the checkout clerk not wearing a mask, however, helped the situation.

In the story I heard on the radio, the woman who observed all this happening did something else altogether. Something astonishing. Something that to me seemed to imitate Christ. Instead of fleeing, numbing or fighting, she went up to the checkout clerk and said, “I notice that you are not wearing your mask.” She listened as the checkout clerk said to her, “It's uncomfortable.”

The woman telling this story, then went home. She thought about the cashier. She remembered that the woman had a very large, broad face. She realized that a normal mask would just not fit

her properly. And so, she got out her sewing machine, and made the cashier a mask that would fit, and she took the mask to the cashier the next day.

“Try this on for size,” the woman said. And the cashier did just this. And, every time the woman talking on the CBC sees the cashier now, the cashier is wearing her mask.

This is what imitating Christ is, I think. This is what it looks like. And, as our story reminds us, it is possible.

If we practise imitating Christ, perhaps we can become like the Thessalonians. Cognitive behavioural therapists have known for a long time that for people to change, and to embrace life-giving ways of living and being and loving, they need not so much to change their thinking, but to change their actions. That it is by changing our actions, that our being changes. If we are afraid of loving, for instance, we need to get out there and love.

Christians have known this since the very beginning. Paul knew this. Thomas A. Kempis, the writer of one of the most popular books of spirituality ever written, “The Imitation of Christ,” knew this.

Those who follow me can never walk in darkness, says the Lord.

By these words, Christ urges us to mould our lives and characters in the image of his, if we wish to be truly enlightened and freed from all blindness of heart. . . . All who wish to understand and to savour the words of Christ to the full must try to make their whole life conform to the pattern of Christ’s life.

We are living in a time of trial. We are in a sense being tested today, as Jesus was tested before the authorities of his day. Can we imitate Christ, in this situation and stay true to our understandings of Christ’s teachings? Can we stay focused on the message? Can we be like the Thessalonians, and continue to choose and embrace life?

I think so.

I pray so.