

Friends of The Cross

Philippians 3:17-4:1

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Rev. Dale Skinner

Mohandas Gandhi once remarked, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." I know that even within the church some of us may find ourselves agreeing with this statement because human beings so often disappoint us. Humans never measure up to the expectations we put on each other. Just look at the luck Nike has had with some of its hired spokespeople over the past years -Tiger Woods, Lance Armstrong and now Oscar Pistorious. I guess at least I can say that as a Christian, Jesus is still my chief spokesperson and his image is one that remains intact no matter how often Christians as a whole may be scrutinized. I know when someone points to the foibles of professed Christian as a reason not to embrace the faith, I usually tell them not to look to Christians (especially me!) but look to Jesus.

But this isn't quite what Paul says in his letter to the Philippians that was read for us this morning. Paul wants his listeners to look at other people and imitate them. He even says that they should imitate him! But the truth is that when Paul says this he is not being vain...he is actually being quite humble. Because by asking people to imitate him, he wants them to see him as one who no longer gives any weight to his own accomplishments or achievements. Instead, Paul wants his audience to imitate him in throwing off all external markers for the single-minded pursuit of sharing in Christ's suffering and knowing the power of his resurrection. Instead of falling in love with their own selves and their own accomplishments, or external things, Paul wants his listeners to become friends of the cross of Christ. In that way they would truly become Christians. Like Paul, they would actually grow closer to Christ because they would allow a space in their lives to be filled with the wisdom of the cross.

Paul's audience is to imitate him or, if he is not present, to imitate those who follow his example, like Timothy and Epaphroditus (see 2:19-30). The word "example" translates the Greek word *typos*. *Typos* refers to a blow that leaves an imprint, like what is left by a stamp or a seal...

or a type-writer...remember those? In moral discourse, the word came to refer to an example or pattern. Paul presents his own life as the *typos* that has made an imprint upon the lives of his associates and that is worthy of imitation. But Paul himself is not the archetype. Paul models his life on Christ, reflected in the words "for to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (1:22). For Paul, all of life is captured in Christ so that everything Paul does is generated by Christ and done for his sake. For this reason, Paul provides the way of the cross of Jesus Christ as the quintessential example for his audience to follow.

So what might that way look like as we continue to make our way through this season of Lent? What does it mean to be imitators? If as the old saying goes...imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. How do we become friends of the cross so we don't become the reason people say I like Christ but I have trouble with Christians?

Well, I like some of the thoughts that were offered years ago by a Christian philosopher and theologian by the name of Jacques Ellul. Ellul was born and raised in France as the son of atheist parents. When Ellul grew older and was confronted with the gospel of Jesus Christ in the wake of the devastation that was caused by the world wars in continental Europe, he found himself moved to become a follower of Jesus. In one of his later essays, Ellul's said that Christians, if we are true to the way of the cross and true to Christ, we must be three things. We must be iconoclasts, messengers of freedom, and givers of hope.

\*Iconoclast isn't a word many of us are familiar with. It's probably not a word you use in regular conversation when you have coffee with your friends at Tim Horton's. To be an iconoclast is to follow in the tradition of the prophets in that you are a breaker of false idols, you seek to challenge images of god that you consider to be false. Iconoclasts aren't afraid to challenge cultural norms.

Paul is an iconoclast when he writes, "many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things." Paul is doing his best here to reveal the other powers that are at work in the world...false gods that lead to the destruction of people.

The word God that gets thrown around these days is used mean all sorts of things...even false things. We have false notions of God. Some people for example believe that God is a man behind a curtain like the Wizard of Oz...or that God only helps those who help themselves...or that God only cares for some people but not all people...those are false notions of God. There are also some who believe that God somehow looks like or resembles them. You know in ancient societies when religion developed many peoples would associate with an animal that somehow represented their character. The swift people of the horse. The wise people of the owl....and so on...although I'm not sure what a Bull would represent. Peoples and persons would adopt these totems...like a horse or an owl. But then the people would start to worship those totems. In effect, the people started to worship representations of themselves. They were worshipping themselves. This is not much different than the God of the belly that Paul refers to. It's more than feeding hunger. It's a kind of navel gazing narcissism.

We want a God that is like us. In fact it's when people realize that God isn't like them that they will reject God. Why do you think we were raised with a Jesus who looks like a white anglo-saxon? I had a ministry colleague from Brooklyn who told me a story about something that once happened in his church. It was one of those stories that became lore in the life of his congregation. It had happened years before his time. It was the day this big black fellow with a gigantic afro and sunglasses walked into the church drop-in centre carrying a picture of a black Jesus. He went up to the wall, took down the picture of the white blonde-haired Jesus and put up the picture of the black Jesus. Someone shouted to him, "Hey Jesus isn't black!" The man responded "Hey man I know that but he ain't white either!" This guy was being an iconoclast. He was trying to break the misguided images of Jesus.

As friends of the cross, we know that Jesus was a humbled, vilified Jew, who was rejected by his own and the authorities of his day...he was even abandoned by his closest friends. Our God is a God who enters human suffering...whose power is known in weakness. This is not the image of God that most people have these days. We are called to be iconoclasts who walk in the way of the cross. It is the way that reveals the true nature of a God for us.

\*\*The second thing that Ellul mentioned as I said, is that we are to be messengers of freedom. Freedom is a big message throughout the scriptures. We worship a God who frees his

people from slavery in Egypt, from idol worship in the desert, from exile in Babylon, from the tyranny of bad leaders, from the bondage of sin, from the fear of death itself. God has always worked to be a God that removes all fear, that we might not be slaves of fear but instead be freed to be the people and the persons we were always meant to be. This is a revelation of the cross. That in Christ's crucifixion we might see the power of love at work. A love that endures suffering for the sake of others, a love that frees us from fear...that frees us for the faith that is necessary in order for us to break through and experience the power of Christ's resurrection in our lives.

It is startling when we pause to think how fear can enslave us and prevent us from so many things. Have you ever given much thought to the things you fear? I know we all fear things. Remember the most often repeated commandment in the New Testament is "fear not" and "be not afraid." We can even find ourselves afraid when we find ourselves in the sanctuary of a church. What are some of the things that you have found yourself fearing in church... besides the sermon? Some people are afraid to laugh...some are afraid to serve on committees...some are afraid to sing in the choir...or read the scriptures...some are afraid to reach out to new people. Some are afraid to be challenged about the way things are.

The well regarded Christian speaker and writer Tony Campolo tells a story about how years ago he was invited to speak at Wheaton College in Illinois. I don't know if many are you are familiar with Wheaton but it has a great history and tradition as a theological school and seminary in the United States. They always had some of the greatest Christian speakers come and give lectures at the university. Well one day they invited Tony Campolo to come and speak and it was at a time when worldwide about 45 000 children were dying every day because of malnutrition and hunger. As he stood there and talked about the children who were dying, people sat back and listened with these ambivalent looks on their faces. Campolo said, "You know there are 45 000 children dying every day and most people don't seem to give a (crap)." -Except Campolo didn't say "crap" he used another four letter word (which I am afraid to say in church) but Campolo wasn't and his audience was shocked to hear it. Campolo's point was made. Here was a church that feared the use of a certain word, more so than they were that 45 000 kids were dying every day. There are times when we need to be freed from our own

ambivalence and then there are times when we need to be freed from our fear if we are to be friends of the cross. We set our minds on earthly things and forget that we are here to help build the Kingdom of heaven. As friends of the cross of Christ we get to be messengers of freedom.

And you know that I think it only naturally follows that when we can break the false images of God and offer a message of freedom in Jesus' name that what we do, when we are truly at our best, is give hope. We give the hope that says yes there is more to this world, that the cross of Christ shows us the way to the Kingdom of God. There is a hope beyond what we see and what we experience to be more...to experience more...to love more...to hope more. As Paul says, "our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup>He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory." This is meant to be our hope. It is the hope that God gives us through the cross that our lives may be transformed.

We have an opportunity in life to give hope to others just as our faith has given us hope to do great things with our lives. Great things not in terms of titles or honours but great things that allow us to point to what God can do to change the world. There are times when we can lose sight of this hope though. I recently heard a story about a Christian youth leader who had years ago taken a group of teenagers to Haiti to do mission work. The leader recounted how while they were there that one of the boys was so struck by what he saw and how there weren't enough doctors to help all the people. He said that he decided he was going to become a doctor and go and help people like the ones he encountered in Haiti. Well years later, the youth leader ran into the man who was the teen who had years earlier made the declaration. He asked him what he was doing, the man responded, "Guess what, I'm a doctor here in the city doing cosmetic surgery on the upper east side." The youth leader was forlorn, the young man, wasn't even doing reconstructive surgery on accident victims and the like...he was doing elective cosmetic surgery. He looked at him and said, "Wow, what happened to going to Haiti? Sounds to me like you sold out." True story by the way. And hard and difficult words given by the former youth leader. But it really does call us as Christians to consider more deeply what it means to give hope...it is not something that is purely cosmetic...that runs only skin deep. And

it is not a hope we reserve solely for ourselves. The hope we give is something deeper, something that goes beyond what we see and know. This is a transformative hope that changes the world. It is the hope we have for others that imitates the hope God has for each of us.

And I don't say this to shame anyone or make them feel guilty. I just say it because as friends of the cross we have been given this incredible gift that can bring about fantastic change in this world we live in. Why do you think Paul was telling his listeners these things with tears in his eyes? It's because Paul knew in his own life what is meant to have the faith in the cross of Christ...and how the cross had changed him and so many others. It changed their understanding of God. A cross breaks the old preconceived notions of God with a fresh revelation . A cross that is there to free us from all fear. A cross that marks the way of hope in a life beyond the life we know. Thanks be to God.