

Imitation, Transformation & Standing Firm

Psalm 27

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Luke 13:31-35

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Since I wasn't at the Lenten Soup supper last Wednesday, so as not to risk repeating anything that Frank shared, I thought I'd use the Epistle for today. Actually, that is not the whole truth. In looking over the scriptures, I felt really strongly about the Epistle and felt drawn to preach on it. But I must also say, after all I heard about Frank's lesson, there was this gnawing feeling from my theatre days like I didn't want to follow that act . . .

3:17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

3:18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.

3:19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

3:20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

3:21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

4:1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

They say, "Imitation is the highest form of flattery," and Paul is asking us in this first sentence here to imitate him. Personally, I'm not sure that flattery is what we need to be making a practice of, and besides that, it reminds me of the pop psychology phrase, "Fake it till you make it." I've often struggled with that way of living because my fear has been that a life of imitation, which is not based on something real, has a very slim chance of long term success - and yet . . . Sometimes we all need a model - something to look at - guidelines until we truly understand the foundation. Like working a recipe until you know it so well you improvise your own touches on it. Perhaps Paul is asking us here to trust him the practice of faith, until we know it so well it becomes part of us.

So, how do we get spiritually from imitation of Paul, to being transformed in Christ, and finally knowing so well who we are and who Christ is that we are standing firm in the face of enemies?

This section of Paul's letter to the Philippians is so full of love and concern. He is genuinely concerned that his beloved brothers and sisters not fall prey to the lure of those who live without knowing what true life in Christ is all about, because we all know that lure. He wrote,

“Their end is destruction; their God is the Belly . . .” well, I know a little something about that; I didn’t make it as long as I had hoped on my fast . . . But honestly, I don’t believe Paul was saying people who love food a bit too much are enemies of the cross of Christ.

No, Paul continues “. . . their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.” He is describing people who spend most of their thoughts only on themselves – what they will eat, what they will wear, who they will be seen with, what is the next pleasure they can be involved with, who they can shock and appall, show power over, and mock.

I think this, living for yourself and your own power and glory, is a great temptation in any time period. It seems to have been a human failing even before we had the “Reality TV” and Paparazzi that we have today! It can be difficult to *stop* thinking about what one needs or wants and focusing only on that. Our human nature is such that the animal part of our brain just seems to slip in and take control, especially when there is a negative stress of fear and anxiety. And in these days of high unemployment and underemployment, financial crisis, earthquakes, tsunamis and whatnot, it is no wonder that humans retreat into themselves and chance addictions which will distract them from the realities.

And the variety of distracts is getting greater. We can now be on the phone, listening to music, watch TV or surf the web all the time, from anywhere. We reach for food, pills, alcohol, sex, and a variety of other obsessions which keep us focused inside – to ourselves and our wants. We live inside ourselves and walk around in the world, but aren’t really there, we are in here.

Yet, Paul tells us that we are citizens in heaven. Where is that? Didn’t John Denver say it is near West Virginia? In the German language there is only one word that is used for both Heaven and Sky, “Himmel”, and I have heard German preachers bemoan that fact because the separation needs to be clear – God is not only in the sky as an old white man with a beard and a harp, heaven can be all around us and in us. But I think the image of looking up to find heaven is not a wholly bad one.

Have you ever noticed when you are deep in thought, you rarely can focus on other people. We may look ahead while walking in public while thinking, but we usually stare at the ground or phase out and not focus on anything in particular. We are “lost” . . . in thought. We are “lost” . . . in ourselves. We are “lost”. But if we think of heaven, we look up! We take the chance of the spell being broken and we look up – and who knows, we might just see other people. And someone might be in need. Or even if others around you aren’t in need – you might just break their spell. Because there *is a reality* out there beyond our own thoughts, and it can be amazing.

Last night I was walking up to the church from the parsonage thinking about what I needed to do and feeling anxious about today. Then I noticed my shadow on the parking lot. Weird – why on earth is it so bright out at night that I would have a shadow? So I looked up – and in the process, remembered to breathe. So then I notice the bright moon in a clear sky – the stars,

and the fresh air in my lungs! I looked around – and saw the neighborhood by moonlight – the hills south of here in the direction of Clarksburg. Bwah! What a glorious moment! I felt so suddenly struck by *the beauty that I was just about to walk through* without notice! I looked up and saw a heavenly sight and felt transformed in a millisecond! As our psalmist said, “Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.”

The differences are clear; be self absorbed and get lost, or look up and share heaven with the others around you. That is what we are called to strive for all year round, but Lent is a special time. Lent is the time of year when we purposely take time to slow down and *feel* what Christ is all about. We have one church year to contemplate 30 years of Jesus’ life, we’ve just finished Christmas and Epiphany – and now we focus on the meat of his ministry, before we reach the pinnacle of Easter. So Lent is when we try – we really try – to focus on the effect of Jesus’ actual ministry and what it means – what led up to his persecution – why it had to happen that way.

Because when we get that down – when we practice and study and focus and share with each other - that is when we know where we belong – we claim our citizenship of Heaven. And as major of the city of heaven, Christ has the ability to reach into our lives and transform us. With that knowledge we can then easily stand firm. We go from imitators of Paul to firmly standing in heaven and acting with Christ to share that heaven with the world.

Amen