

“Imitating Christ” – Philippians 2:1-13; Preached by Michael Cheuk, October 1, 2017

As Christians, we often call ourselves “followers of Jesus Christ.” How do we do that? What does it mean for us today for follow Christ?

In today’s third scripture passage, we read from Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi. Paul exhorted the Christians to follow Christ, to imitate Christ, to have the same mind, the same attitude (v. 5) as that of Christ in order to promote unity and harmony within that church.

In the spirit of Paul’s exhortation for us to think of ourselves in the way that Christ Jesus thought of himself, I wonder if you might indulge me in a thought experiment. Let’s imagine what might have gone through Jesus’ mind...if I were Jesus.

So...Hi, I’m Jesus, the son of God! From the beginning, I was the Word that created the universe. I *founded* this world. My daddy, who loved the world so much, saw things that were breaking his heart, and he asked me to go down to earth to show the world a better way. So, my first thought was...well, is there another way? I mean, I’m comfortable here in heaven. I’m a divine being and I’m asked to become a mortal human who gets hungry and thirsty, who suffers pain and loss. I’m a king and I’m asked to become a servant. Couldn’t Dad send me in my royal regalia escorted by an angelic entourage? Shock and awe? No, instead, Daddy wanted to send me to earth as a helpless baby, born to an unwed teenager in an insignificant part of the world among a people oppressed by the Romans. Who would go to a place like that?

Well, as you know, I went to earth and did the will of my father. Frankly, it was hard for me. I had to learn a new language, new customs, new culture. Their music was OK, but it sure wasn’t the angelic chorus that I was used to. I’ve often thought that it would have been a lot easier if those earthlings would just adjust and learn *my* ways of doing things. But then I remembered that before I could teach them the ways of God’s kingdom, I first had to be fully one of them, to be fully with them in the flesh, so to speak. I had to earn the right to speak to them by serving them.

So here I was, the king of the universe, serving these people. Oh sure, at first, they were very happy for me to visit and heal the sick, give sight to the blind, feed the hungry. In fact, Satan told me that if I would just meet all their needs, turning stones into bread, then people would love and follow me. As much as I was tempted to follow that way, I found that as a fully human being, there was no way for me to meet the increasingly high demands. I disappointed a lot of people because I didn’t heal all of them. I even disappointed my friends, Mary and Martha for not getting to Bethany fast enough to heal their brother Lazarus. There’s only so much one human being can do to be a servant.

What’s more, for some, being a servant was not enough. They wanted a divine Messiah, not a human servant. They wanted someone who had charisma, eloquence, and power. So many of them saw themselves as victims, and they wanted a warrior to defeat their oppressors. I disappointed them because I did not meet their expectations. They wanted to move up in the world. But my way was not the path of upward mobility, but the way of *downward* mobility...of descending from heaven to earth, the way of letting go of privilege to embrace servanthood. That made some very sad, like the rich young ruler.

I even made some of them mad! I had the audacity to tell them that God not only loved them... God also loved their enemies. God loved those who oppressed the Israelites -- like tax collectors. And on the flip side, God loved the people that the Israelites oppressed – like the Samaritans, pagans, prostitutes and sinners. People wanted me to challenge the status quo when it benefitted them. But heaven help me if I tried to challenge the status quo when they stood to lose. They basically said to me, “If you’re going to be a servant, then serve *us!*”

I tried to remind them that God didn’t send me to earth to serve *them*. God sent me to earth to serve *God*. Unfortunately for God’s people, they forgot that prophets speak hard truths that reveal the ways they’re falling short. Unfortunately for me, God’s people reminded me that prophets were without honor in their own town. You’ve heard it said, “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.” I just want to add: “Before the truth sets you free, it

tends to make you miserable” (Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.) There are truths about our lives that are too painful, too embarrassing, too shameful for us to acknowledge to ourselves, much less publicly. Many times, we would rather choose the misery of slavery than the joy of freedom because we can’t face hard truths about ourselves.

So, I have to say, being the “Christ,” the “Messiah,” was not all that’s cracked up to be. It was a journey of downward mobility. Paul talked about me “making myself nothing,” emptying myself. But let me tell you, I was not “selfless” in the sense of being a doormat. Those in power do not worry about doormats and pushovers. Instead, they worry about those who present a real threat to the status quo, those who upset the power structure. To the Romans, I threatened their empire by my talk of the Kingdom of God. To the religious leaders, I threatened their authority by telling them that prostitutes and sinners were entering the kingdom ahead of them. To the rich, I threatened their privilege by asking them to sell everything and give to the poor. To the poor, I threatened their victimhood when I welcomed tax collectors into my company.

Let me tell you a secret. For all the differences between the Romans, the religious leaders, the rich, the poor, and many other groups, there’s one thing they all have in common: they are all obsessed with grasping on to life as they know it. Several times in my ministry, I’ve taught this truth: “Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39, 16:25; Luke 9:24; 17:33). This was a hard lesson for my followers to learn. Frankly, they didn’t get it. So, when things finally came to a head, the only way I could teach that truth was to show it and to live it out. People say that the Romans crucified me or the Jewish religious leaders had me killed. The truth was that I willingly and intentionally chose to lay down my life on the cross. Was it easy for me? Oh heavens no! I begged my heavenly Father to take that cup of suffering from me. While on the cross, I could have, at the blink of an eye, summoned a legion of angels to rescue me and destroy my enemies. But I didn’t.

Why? Because God wanted to show that there is more to this life as we think we know it. I was willing to lay down my old life so that God could give me a new, resurrected life. It took a downward journey to the grave before God could exalt me to the highest place. The end of my story on earth was not death, but a new and exalted resurrection life! And that’s what I meant when I taught my disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” That’s the story of my life. Was it easy? No. I have the scars to prove it.

But I did it because I love you. I love you with a love that cares and comforts your present reality, *and* a love that confronts and challenges you to live up to your potential in the future. So if you want to imitate me, to think of yourself as I thought of myself, I invite you to ponder of what I’ve just said. Thanks for listening and for having an open heart and mind to receive my words.

OK...I’m back. Thanks for indulging me in this spiritual thought experiment.

I don’t have anything else to add. However I do want to ask three questions:

1. Are there steps of downward mobility to which Christ may be calling us? ...not because we are failures, but because we want to be faithful in imitating Christ in his way of humility, servanthood and obedience?
2. Are there truths about ourselves that we need to confront and acknowledge? ...not to make us miserable, but to lead us into freedom?
3. Are there parts of our lives to which we are clinging because that’s all we know? What needs to die so that something new may be resurrected?

May God give us the grace, the strength and the courage to ponder and begin answering these questions as individuals and as a church family in the days and weeks to come. Amen.