

October 19, 2014 – 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
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Imitation Christian

I love ice cream. Really good ice cream. Real ice cream. Before Ben & Jerry's or boutique ice cream, Breyer's was the brand known for being really real. But in the last few years, Breyer's has introduced another product. You have to look closely at the cartons, because they look very similar, but if you do, you will see that now there are two kinds of Breyers you can buy: ice cream, and another product. The package says it is "frozen dairy dessert." In other words, imitation ice cream. Breyers, how could you do it?!

It's surprising, since these days there's a growing movement towards more natural foods. You want to eat better? Avoid imitations. Real food tastes better, is better for you, is better for the environment. Granted, that's an awful lot to expect of ice cream. And, it should be admitted, eating lots of ice cream, even all natural ice cream, will probably not improve your health. Still, "Frozen dairy dessert" lacks appeal. In the realm of food, imitation is not as good.

But such is not the case when it comes to discipleship. In the realm of God, imitation is a good thing. In fact, the term "Imitation Christian" can be understood to be not a bad thing, not a fake thing, but rather as a powerful and pedagogical thing—a way of learning, and growing, a way of discovering who you really have been created to be. When it comes to being a follower of Jesus, imitation is a way of becoming more real.

Before digging into that, a little background on where this idea of imitation appears in the Bible, specifically as it appears in today's second reading. Almost every week in our church, the second reading is an epistle, which means, a section from an ancient letter to people who were living in an area of the Mediterranean. For the last couple of weeks we heard from the letter to the Philippians—that is to say, the people of Philippi. Today we read the first part of the first letter to the Thessalonians—that is, the people of Thessalonica. Many of these letters were written by the apostle Paul, who visited these places, together with other people, Silvanus, and Timothy, telling people there how life was different because of Jesus. And then the people in those places started gathering together regularly to do the things that Jesus said to do: meet together, break bread together, pray together, share things together. Which is to say, they became churches.

On this Sunday, as we read this letter in this century and in this place, as we gather together as a church for worship and our annual meeting, it is right that we begin, as this letter begins, with thanks. Thank you, Irving Parkians. Thank you for your work of faith, and labor of love, and steadfastness of hope. Thank you for all our meetings together, for tables where we break bread together, for prayers, for our sharing.

The letter continues, reminding the readers of how they have stayed faithful, even when times were rough. Again, on a Sunday in which we look back on a year in which we've done much, and look forward to another busy and no doubt challenging year, how good to be reminded of the faith that brings us together, the faith that binds us together, the faith that will see us through any and all tough times.

This faith, this faith through tough times, has made the Thessalonians an example to all around them. The Thessalonians have been persecuted, but their hospitality, their steadfastness, their character is known through the region. They are models.

They got that way by having models themselves: Paul, Silvanus, Timothy, and of course, Jesus. This now, is where this idea of imitation comes up. Become imitators, Paul writes, here and in other epistles. Through imitation, the Thessalonians became more able themselves to witness to the gospel and the power of the Spirit. Through imitation, they became more powerful, more convincing, more authentic witnesses. Through imitation, they became the people God created them to be.

I think we can see something of that power of imitation in workplaces, particularly in pedagogical, in teaching situations. In articles I've been reading about education reform there is an emphasis on the importance of models, of apprenticeship. Research shows that many new teachers may be prepared theoretically, but they lack on the ground skills. Those first years especially can be challenging, and many promising teachers leave the profession a few years in. But, by pairing new teachers with a mentor, they can watch what works, and try it out themselves. With someone as a model, new teachers have a greater chance of finding that they can stand on their own feet, develop their voice, and discover success as a teacher.

I think, too, of the importance and power of imitation in the names we give to children. We want them to learn who they are, in connection with a larger past, guided by parents, grandparents, godparents. So children have their family name, and a given name. Perhaps that first or second name is someone we hope this child will grow up to imitate, perhaps a beloved aunt, perhaps a significant person in history, perhaps someone from the Bible, a Paul, or a Timothy...I have not yet met a Silvanus.

Nor have I met a Donna Jean, but I know that she, too, is someone to imitate. She's not in the Bible, but she, too is a model of faith. Donna Jean Holmquist was a member of this congregation who was a model of giving, of serving, of teaching, of volunteering. She was someone who lived her life as a model of discipleship. And so now, every year, this church presents an award to someone who's been doing a good imitation of Donna Jean.

Or, you can hear about others to imitate here in our Stewardship testimonies. The people who come forward and talk about how they give to church, they themselves are people to imitate. But more often than not, as they share, they talk about someone they're trying to imitate, someone who made them think about living and giving in a different way.

Or you can think about what Jesus said, when he was asked about giving, which is the story of the gospel reading today. Jesus asks for a coin and then asks, "Who's on it?" Actually, specifically, Jesus asks, "Whose image is on it?"

Whose image? That's Jesus asking us, reminding us of another thing the Bible says about imitation, about images. "In whose image are you created?" Genesis one says, you are created in God's image. Jesus says, when it comes to living and giving, you are created to imitate the one who loves you, and saves you. You are created to live and give your all, to the living, giving God of all. Imitate that, and discover who you really are.