

Pentecost 16: October 2, 2011

Theme: Follow the Leader

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text for this morning is from, St. Paul's letter the Philippians that actually comes after our Epistle Lesson this morning, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved."¹ This is our Text.

Imitation is one way that we can learn many things, and throughout our lives there are many things that we in fact imitate. It starts when we are young as has come readily apparent in my house with Joey and Elizabeth. Wherever I go, those two will follow right behind me. Not only copying where I go, but usually imitates the way in how I am moving or acting, and even my words and sometimes, even my emotions.

St. Paul in our text for today speaks of this very thing. He encourages us to be imitators of the right things. He recognizes that humans will imitate things anyways, so it should be the right things we imitate. Imitation is not just actions. It is not just going through the motions. Imitation includes thought, word, and deed. The entire mind, body, soul and strength are included in the exhortation to imitation by St. Paul. St. Paul writes that we should imitate him, as He imitates Christ. In other words, St. Paul is encouraging the Philippians, and us, to be imitators of Christ.

There are many today, who do not imitate Christ. As St. Paul writes, "[they] walk as enemies of the cross of Christ." Many today walk as if there is no God. They walk not in humility, but they boast in something of themselves. They live their lives as if there is no need of salvation. They do not want to admit they are sinful and in need of a savior. The message being preached in the world today is one that says, "I think I can save myself from myself." The message being taught in the world is that there something within ourselves that we can use to save ourselves. Sure, we may have some bad things, or downfalls, or a few things to work on, but I have the strength inside myself to overcome that adversity. I do not need any help from God. I can save myself, that is, if I even need saving.

Does that message of the world pervade into our lives in any way? Do we fall into the same traps that the world does? As we examine our own lives, do we live as if there was no God? Do we come to church on Sunday mornings, or even Wednesday evenings during Advent and Lent, and then leave God here. As soon as we leave the church building, or the even the church parking lot, do we live the rest of the time of the week in faith towards God and in love toward our neighbor? St. Paul tells the Philippians that those who do not walk as imitators of Christ have their minds fixed on the things of this world. In other words, the things of this world are their gods. The enemies of the cross of Christ seek to fill their own bodies and their own bellies. They chase after the carnal pleasures of the flesh. What can I do for my own pleasure? How can I best suit my own needs or fill my own desires? Who cares about the needs of my neighbor as long as I can take care of myself? I have to look out for myself, because I am the one who matters most.

Instead of looking out for others, the sinful flesh likes to turn inward. It likes to focus the attention on ourselves. St. Paul tells us however, that those who walk as if they have no need of a Savior; those who walk in sin and shame have their end in destruction or annihilation. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. No one

¹ Philippians 3:17-4:1

deserves to be saved by God. There is not one of us that has done such great things for God that He will somehow reward us with eternal life. Salvation does not depend on myself. Salvation must come from outside.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is that very salvation of all our sins from outside ourselves. Jesus took our very flesh upon Himself by becoming fully man. He died the death that was meant for us. He took the shame of death, even death upon a cross. He bore our sins and our iniquities. He died and rose again for us. He died not for Himself. He rose not for Himself. He died for you and for me, and He rose so that you and I would be fully restored with the Heavenly Father. Though we are disobedient and sinful, Christ became sin for us so that we would not die in sin.

Through the merits of Christ, we belong to a new citizenship. Through baptism, we have been made saints in Christ Jesus; washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. We have been given a new fellowship. We belong not the world and self-destruction, but we belong to God. We belong to a different commonwealth. Every couple of years our country gets a boost in national pride as we cheer on our countries athletes in the Olympics. Each person that competes in the games is competing not only for themselves, but they represent something greater themselves. Each competitor at the Olympics is a representative of their respective countries. Each person belongs to a different state, a different commonwealth.

So we too represent something greater than ourselves. Through the humility of Christ, we have been transformed into glorious saints. Right now we are part of the church militant, but one day we will fully realize the glory and forgiveness and salvation won for us through Christ. When we become part of the church triumphant, we will fully realize the reality that we are crowns of beauty in the hand of our God. On the resurrection of all flesh on the last day, we will fully realize in both body and soul that we belong to a different fellowship.

Until that last great day, St. Paul encourages us stand firm in the midst of persecution and suffering. We press on towards the goal of eternal life with our Heavenly Father. We are reminded that our goal is not earthly pleasures, but our goal is heavenly pleasures. The Christian life is lived as St. Paul writes in our Epistle Lesson today, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward toward what lies ahead. Pressing on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”² The goal, the reward of eternal life is not something that we earn. It was earned on the Tree of Calvary. It was earned by the rest in the tomb. It was earned by the breaking of the tomb on Easter morning. That very prize of forgiveness of sins, that very prize of life everlasting is given to us here at the font; here through His Word, and here on the altar.

As we live our lives in imitation, as we follow our leader, we follow Him in many ways. We follow Him in works of service and love towards our neighbor. We follow Christ by His example of helping others, serving them, not for our glory but for God’s. We serve others as brothers and sisters because that is what we are. We belong to a different commonwealth. We are family and God is our Father. We follow not only in acts of love and mercy, but we will follow Him on the last great day. Just as his body was made glorious, so our lowly bodies will transformed to be like His glorious body. Until that day when He gathers together, we boldly and confidently pray as these words from our sermon hymn this morning,

“Faint not nor fear, His arms are near;
 He changes not who holds you dear;
 Only believe, and you will see
 That Christ is all eternally.”³ Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, keep you hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

² Philippians 3:13-14

³ LSB 664:4