

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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October 23, 2005
23rd Sunday after Pentecost
1 Thessalonians 1:5b-10
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Leviticus 19:1,2,15-18
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 33
Second Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 1:5b-10
Gospel: Matthew 22:34-46

Imitate the Imitators

When you were a child growing up, did you ever imitate your Mom or your Dad in the way that they did certain things? If you are a parent now, have you ever noticed that your children imitate you and do the things you do? It's kind of cute when they are doing something you like, isn't it? It's kind of annoying and embarrassing when they are imitating the stuff you wish they wouldn't pay attention to. You know, when they start imitating you by screaming at their dolls because you were yelling at them when they were naughty. That's not real encouraging. It kind of reminds us that we have got to be pretty good about picking who we are going to imitate. It also reminds us that we have people that are always going to probably be imitating us, that look to us. It reminds us to watch how we do things.

This morning, as Paul writes to the Thessalonians, the Holy Spirit leads him to speak some things that really are important for us to learn also and it has to do with imitating others. Paul stressed how thankful he was that they imitated not only him, but they also imitated the Lord as they heard the message with joy in spite of suffering and how that message rang out from them. So if we are going to consider who to imitate, I am not going to stand here today and say you should be imitators of me or imitators of any of the other people here, but I think we would do well to imitate those who imitate God. That would be the Thessalonians—what we learn from them this morning. They imitated God because they received the message with joy and they imitated Christ because the message rang out from them. And as you and I seek to live in response to who Jesus is and what he has done for us, as we seek to thank him that he has taken away every last one of our sins, those are two important things for us to do—receive the message with joy, and let the message ring out from us.

Last week we talked about Paul and the Christians in Thessalonica--the Greek town that was on the trade route so a lot of people would have gone through there. Paul was there for maybe only as little as three weeks' time. He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and reasoned with the people and showed them from scripture how Jesus had to be the Messiah and that the Messiah had to suffer and die—not just be one who was going to rule gloriously, but he was also going to be the “suffering servant” as he spoke of in Isaiah.

We are told that some believed that message and that is who Paul was speaking of here, but we also know that many of the Jews in the synagogue rejected it and ended up chasing them out of town after just a short time there. As we said last week, he had sent Timothy back to find out how things were going, to build them up where they

needed to be built up, and then he rejoiced to hear that they were growing and that they were thriving in the Word of God. So what we are reading is still part of the introduction to the whole letter where he is giving thanks for certain things about the Thessalonians. What he mentions specifically is that *"You became imitators of us and of the Lord"*. They imitated the Lord in spite of severe suffering. It makes sense that they would have had severe suffering, doesn't it, if they chased Paul out of town for proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. The people that didn't want to hear that would no doubt make life miserable for those who believed it—those that had been Jews and now believed that Jesus was the Messiah, those that had been pagans and set aside their false idols and turned to serve the living and true God. If they were proclaiming Christ, it only stands to reason that they would try to stop that, but they would make life miserable for them.

So they imitated Christ in that Christ was willing to suffer because of his intense love for you and me. He was willing to stand and hear false accusations. He was willing to endure the cross, scolding and shame, because he loves you and me and he wanted you and me and every other person in the world to have their sins completely paid for. So the Thessalonians, recognizing how important the message of Christ was to themselves and to others, were willing to endure suffering so that they could receive the message. They were willing to endure suffering to receive the message Paul says *"with the joy given by the Holy Spirit."*

It's kind of important how he connects that to the Holy Spirit. Think of what we are on our own. On our own—did you hear the first lesson about *"Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy."* In our own minds we hear "be holy"—that means be perfect, be absolutely without sin. In our own minds, don't we kind of ratchet it down a little bit to "do your best, try real hard and God will say that is okay"? But then God has the audacity to go on and spell out what he says is holiness. We might look at the first couple of things that we heard—*"Do not pervert justice"*—we might say we don't pervert justice so we have no problem with that. *"Do not go about spreading slander among your people."* Do we ever really think it is slander? We think we are justified when we talk about someone else even though it is slander. And then he goes as far as to say, *"Do not hate your brother in your heart."* Now do you feel like you have a target on your forehead because God just shot the arrow of his law straight into you and made you think you are not perfect as God said you should be?

That is what I am on my own and that is what you are on your own. To receive the message with joy wouldn't come naturally to us because it isn't how we think naturally. The Holy Spirit has to give us this joy to understand just what sinners we are through the law proclaimed to us—that we don't love perfectly, that we can't love perfectly and doing your best doesn't get you anywhere closer to God. Doing your best is just the false confidence the devil wants you to put your trust in. But the joy the Holy Spirit gives us is this truth, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were still sinners, the Holy Spirit, through water and the Word, through the Word of God, through wafer and wine, comes to us and says, "I love you. I have taken away every last one of your sins." That is what gives us this joy. That is what leads us to endure suffering that might come from the hands of anyone so that we keep hearing the message with joy. If we aren't experiencing as much joy in our lives—this kind of joy that God gives us isn't dependent on outward circumstances. It isn't dependent upon having the right

Powerball numbers this past week. It isn't dependent upon being healthy and hale and hearty. This kind of joy that we are talking about is dependent upon something outside of us. It is dependent upon God.

When you and I lack joy in our lives, it may well be that we aren't spending enough time with the Holy Spirit so that he gives us that joy. We aren't spending enough time with the Word. We aren't spending enough time going back to our baptism where God washed away our sins before we even knew who he was. Maybe we aren't fully contemplating this incredible mystery of God's love that comes to us in Word and Sacrament, in wine and wafer, where he says, "This is my body. This is my blood, given for you." The more time we spend with the Spirit, the more time we are going to receive that message with joy.

Joy is kind of a contagious thing, isn't it? Have you ever been around anyone that is really joyful and upbeat when you are having a down day? First it irritates you a little bit. If they keep going through your irritation, it picks you up, doesn't it? It raises your spirits and puts a smile on your face when you don't even want to smile.

Joy that is contagious also can ring out from you and I just as it did from the Thessalonians. It can ring out as we share the message of God's love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus with those around us and with those we will never meet, which is exactly what Paul says the Thessalonians did. He said, "We don't have to talk about your faith because it became known everywhere. Everyone knows how you received us, how you believers received us with joy. You weren't the troublemakers that chased us out of town. They know that even after we left, the message continued to ring out there where you are, but even farther." It says beyond the area they were in, Macedonia and Achaia. "*Your faith in God has become known everywhere.*" "They know how the message of Jesus and his salvation rang out from you. Your message of Jesus, the one you are waiting for, who has risen from the dead and will return to take us from the dead back to be with him in heaven."

Think about that incredible statement. Here are a bunch of Christians that didn't have a lot of time with the apostle Paul, and yet the message so touched them that it rang out. They couldn't help speaking it. It was contagious. They had to share it with others. They became imitators of Paul in the good sense, which devoted his life to spreading the Gospel, and they shared it with others.

The joy that is in our hearts is contagious when we are focused on it. All too often the devil throws other things in our path that take our attention off of the joy that we have in Christ. That is why it takes diligence and effort to focus on that joy so that this message can ring out. It can ring out from our congregation. It can ring out here in our community as the people that we meet, we share Jesus with them. You can invite them to come to worship here and hear Christ here, but if they never make it through the door of the church, they may never hear of Jesus. But you and I have the privilege and the opportunity to be his witnesses, to speak not only to have them come to our church, but to tell them, "Here is my Savior. Here is what he did for you. Here is how he helps me. I see what you are going through and I think he can help you also because he died for your sins also."

The message can ring out from us in our daily lives to our friends, relatives, associates and neighbors that we come into contact with. It also rings out from us in other ways and all of them are equally important. One of the things that I do with the confirmation class in school is to take them through the history of our congregation. We get those yellow books out, maybe you all have them. Part of it is on the website if you want to read through it. We read through the history of our congregation. But one of the things that I try to highlight (because to me it is striking) is the number of people from this congregation that have gone on to become pastors or teachers. They left Morrison and went out wherever the Lord called them, and the message of salvation rang out from them so that others would know about it.

It is amazing at times when I go to various places across our church body and have given different presentations or something and the people ask you where you are from and I tell them from Morrison. I expect them not to know where Morrison is. (People thirty miles away don't often know where Morrison is.) Yet they will say that's where so-and-so is from that they went to school with or that was their pastor or their teacher or something like that. That is something to thank the Lord for, that he has given us people in our congregation that were willing to leave our congregation and go and have the Gospel ring out from them. The Lord has given us some that are sitting here that have that ability and those gifts from the Lord. Lord willing, he will move more of us to study for the full-time ministry so that the message rings out from us.

The message also rings out from us as we support other areas of ministry with our offerings, whether it is the synod that trains pastors and teachers, even from among our midst, to go share the Gospel, or our area high schools that we support. This coming Sunday, the 30th, Manitowoc Lutheran High School celebrates its 50th anniversary of having the Gospel ring out from them. One of the ways it rings out is because we support it with our offerings so that they can ring out that message. That message is proclaimed to young people at a time when the devil is working very hard to attack their faith. What a blessing it is that we have places like Fox Valley Lutheran High School or Manitowoc Lutheran High School that have the message ring out from them. That is why God has us here—so that the message will ring out through us to others.

Here is another truth that maybe we should stop and think about—the message rings out from us whether we are talking or not, doesn't it? Just like our kids imitate those things about us that we wish they wouldn't notice and we wish they wouldn't imitate, the unbelievers around us that know that we are Christians are watching how we conduct ourselves. So we are proclaiming a message whether we are speaking or not. That is why, as Christians, we want to love perfectly even though we know we can't. We want to love perfectly. We want to do it because we want to thank the God who has saved us. We also want to do it so that we attract others to the message of Christ so that they too may hear the message and be saved.

So imitate the imitators and remember there are others always imitating you.