

“Learning by Imitation”

Based on Gen. 15:1-11, 17-18 and Phil. 3:17-4:1

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Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

My mom taught me and my sister some basic life skills. She taught us how to fry bacon and eggs. She taught us how to make cinnamon toast. She taught us how to darn socks. Having come of age during the Great Depression, thriftiness was something my mom and dad valued. So those socks didn't get thrown away if they had holes in them. And, no, I don't darn my socks. My sister and I learned these things from mom by watching how she did it and then imitating her.

Learning by imitation is a primary way we learn how to do things. You can read up on how to do things and probably figure it out. But it seems to me it's more effective to watch someone who knows what they are doing, whether it's watching instructional videos on YouTube or watching your mom flip the egg over without breaking the yolk, and then imitating what you see.

Learning by imitation also affects who we are as people, our behaviors and the way we see the world. For example, not once in my life did I hear my parents curse. And the one time I let a curse word slip out in front of my dad it raised his ire. Maybe they cursed out of earshot of me but I'll never know. I have *almost* never cursed around my boys and when it slipped out I regretted it. My parents set the example that I imitate. My dad was an avid reader. In our living room we had floor to ceiling bookshelves all along the south wall and they were filled with books. My dad was a member of the book of the month club. Every evening dad would be sitting in his Lazy Boy reading. I've picked up that habit. Every summer our family went on a two to three week vacation. We hooked up a pop up trailer and took off, staying at KOA camps and visiting state and national parks, mainly out west. These trips expanded my view of America beyond my home town, that we live in a country filled with natural treasures. The examples of our parents affect our behaviors and the way we see the world. And we tend to imitate them.

Learning by imitation is also what discipleship is. Disciples learn from and follow the practices of the master. By observation and by teaching, disciples take on the habits and behaviors of the master, slowly being transformed into a sort of image of their master. As disciples of Jesus, who is our master, our discipleship consists of learning from and following the example of our master, to become more like Jesus by imitation.

When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Philippi, he encourages them to imitate him, to imitate his practice as a disciple of Jesus, to imitate the way he lived his life. Paul urged them to imitate him not because he had a big ego. He wasn't telling them to imitate him because he is the master and they are disciples of Paul. They are all disciples of Jesus. Paul was striving to live his life in imitation of Jesus. He was striving to be transformed into the image of Jesus. So what Paul was saying to the Philippians was for them to look to him and others as living, breathing examples of how a disciple of Jesus makes their way in the world. They could hear the stories of Jesus and what Jesus' teachings were about how to live. But it is also helpful to have people in your life who demonstrate what living in the way of Jesus looks like. Paul was one of those living examples for them to follow as they strove to be imitators of the way of Jesus.

We have a lot of good examples that we can imitate as examples of Christian disciples, not just Paul. Our examples don't even have to be Christians. We have the example of Abraham, who we heard about this morning. We heard this morning about how Abraham trusted in God's promises. Not that Abraham didn't have questions. God had promised Abraham descendants and land. Great promises; but Abraham is old and so is his wife. No heir. And where is this land that Abraham is supposed to give his non-existent heir? So Abraham asks God, "how is this going to happen?" God doesn't answer Abraham's question directly. Instead, God tells Abraham to go look up at the night sky and try to count all the stars. That's how many descendants he would have. God told Abraham to sacrifice some animals and lay them out on the ground. Then, in a vision, God passed between the sacrificed animals in the form of a smoking pot and a blazing torch, symbolically making a covenant

promise that God will provide land for Abraham's descendants. And, indeed, God did follow through with that promise...400 years after Abraham was dead. Without telling Abraham how these promises would be fulfilled, Abraham still trusted that God would fulfill those promises. And that trust in God was credited to Abraham as righteousness. Abraham's trust in God sets an example for us. We can follow Abraham's example by trusting that God fulfills the promises God has made to us, the promise of eternal life, the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, the promise of God's reign on earth.

We also have the example of the gospels. They are always available to us to read and reflect on. We can read again and again the teachings of Jesus and consider how our lives reflect his teachings. Lent is a time intended for us to do just that.

We have the examples of all the saints, those whose lives have been recorded for us to be inspired from and to learn from. For example, we have the life story of St. Patrick who we celebrate today. Yes, St. Patrick's Day has more to it than a reason to party. We can learn from St. Patrick. At the age of sixteen, he was seized by Irish marauders where he was forced to tend sheep. After six years of slavery, Patrick managed to escape to Gaul where he entered a monastery. Eventually, Patrick became a bishop. In 432, he was sent to Ireland, where he once was a slave, to attempt to convert the island to Christianity. Until his death thirty years later, in 461, he had managed to plant churches all through Ireland, presenting the Christian faith in ways that made sense to the Irish. He didn't do it by himself, but with his leadership Patrick converted all of Ireland to Christianity, a Christian faith that was contextual, that made sense to the Irish. So we can learn about how Patrick managed to do that, the establishment of Celtic Christianity.

Of course, we don't just get our examples of Christian discipleship from the Bible or the stories of the saints who have gone before us. There are living, breathing examples who have come in and out of our lives. I have been blessed to be in the presence of many living saints throughout my life. I am thinking of Dr. David Thomas, who was the pastor of St. Luke's UMC, my home church, when I became serious about the faith. He encouraged and mentored me into ministry. And I

think of Don and Ruby Gruver from Edgerton, Ohio, a delightful couple who never had a bad word for anyone, never complained about anything, and graciously gave of themselves day after day to support the ministries of the church I was pastoring and maintaining the community food pantry. They provided the juice we used for communion from the grape vine that grew in their backyard. They were such an inspiration to me. Who are those living, breathing examples of Christian discipleship that you have encountered?

As we seek out and follow those who are examples of what a Jesus follower looks like, it is good to keep in mind that each of us sets an example, for good or ill. What kind of example are you setting? I hope that question disturbs you a little. It's a serious responsibility. If we dare to proclaim ourselves to be Christians, then we are putting ourselves out there. We represent Christ if we are going to claim to be his disciples. What people think of Christians is going to be based partly on how you and I behave. Don't know about you, but I haven't always been my best self.

And this is the thing about looking to others as examples of Christian discipleship as well as acknowledging that we are examples as well: and that is being an example is tricky. People are people. And that means they are imperfect. People let you down. Everyone has a bad day now and then. We get tired and crabby, we unintentionally hurt people with our words, we miss opportunities to respond to the needs of others, and sometime we just plain screw things up. And it can be disappointing when the person you look up to as an example of what a Christian ought to be lets you down. I have known more than one person who had an amazing ministry, blessed a lot of people, helped so many grow in their faith, and then turned around and had an affair or some other moral failing that wrecked their ministry. It didn't take away from the great ministry they did, but it was disappointing to see their fall. But that's what happens. We are fallible. And we are responsible for the actions we take.

The good news is that we don't have to be perfect, nor do our heroes in the faith. There is forgiveness with God. There is grace. When our mentors in the faith mess up, we offer grace. When we screw up in

our discipleship, we extend to *ourselves* grace. In fact, this is part of what being a disciple of Jesus is about. Jesus was always forgiving, always extending grace, never turning his back on others, even those Pharisees that he was always arguing with and calling out as snakes and hypocrites. Jesus didn't give up on anyone. He never walked away from a conversation. He always stayed at the table. The grace that Jesus extended to every person is an example that we need to embrace and live in to even as we are grateful that our failures will never cause Jesus to give up on us. In the words of the great Christian artist Keith Green, who had a big influence on my discipleship when I was a kid, we just keep doing our best and pray that it's blessed. Jesus takes care of the rest. Our task is to imitate those Christians we admire, try to set the best example we can, and trust that somehow God can use our lives to set an example for others to follow, so that more and more people can come to know the way of Jesus.

We are all disciples and Jesus is our master. We are all learning, trying to find our way through life by following the example of others. People go in and out of our lives. As we develop in our faith other people come into our lives that challenge us to go further and deeper. It's an ongoing process through our lives. We are all on our way to Christian perfection as John Wesley would say. My encouragement to you is to keep at it. Keep working on your discipleship, looking to exemplars of Christian discipleship, those we find in the scriptures, in the pages of history, and in our own lives, learning from all of them and following the examples they set. Keep working at imitating the sacrificial love of Jesus. And may God take our humble offerings of following Jesus and bless them so that the world might be transformed into what God has always desired.

Let us pray:

Lord, we thank You for those saints You have placed among us, who show us what it takes to be a follower of Jesus. Give us the wisdom to follow good examples, to learn from the greats, so that each of us might be better imitators of You. In the name of our Master, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.