

March 7, 2004  
Second Sunday of Lent  
David L. Edwards

### *Imitating Christ*

Philippians 3:17-4:1

*Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us...stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.*

*We ought every day to renew our purpose in God, and to stir our heart to fervor and devotion, as though it were the first day of our conversion.*

--Thomas a Kempis, The Imitation of Christ

Rachel's commitment to Covenant Membership today is a moment of reflection and recommitment for all of us. The commitment to Covenant Membership is not first of all a commitment to the Church of the Covenant. It is not even primarily a commitment to the disciplines of "Our Covenant One with Another." It is a commitment to Jesus Christ, his teachings and life, the meaning of his death and resurrection, and his living, leading presence that calls us to follow him today. That central commitment places us in a community of faith, for we can't be Christians by ourselves. And our commitment, to be sustained, must be guided and nourished by specific spiritual practices or disciplines. But we must never lose sight of the centrality of Christ in all of this. This will save us from becoming preoccupied with the maintenance and perpetuation of the church, and from getting lost in a deadly legalism when it comes to spiritual disciplines. A living faith in the living Christ—this is what we are about and what Covenant Membership is about.

Our church structures membership so it is clear that to be a Christian means a committed life, a life that takes Christ as its transforming center. A life of faith cannot be taken for granted, cannot "just happen." It is the dynamic, transforming process of Christ's call to follow him and our commitment to follow. Covenant Membership has nothing to do with spiritual achievement. It has nothing to do with being spiritually superior or part of an elite group. The purpose of the Church of the Covenant is stated in the opening sentence of a vision statement

the Covenant Members began working on following Bev Cosby's death: "The vision for the Church of the Covenant lies in offering persons the opportunity to advance toward the fullest expression of their Christian faith." Covenant Membership is about offering everyone and anyone a framework of discipleship, with basic, simply stated spiritual disciplines that are gleaned from centuries of spiritual practice, so that our lives find their fullest and deepest expression, so that we become who we really are and are made to be. A life that drifts along, that makes no specific effort to cultivate and attend to its spiritual center is shallow and ill-spent, lived in a kind of unconsciousness. The Church of the Covenant simply holds out the invitation to those who would freely desire to enter into an intentional life of growth through in inward journey of the spirit and the outward journey of love toward the world, all in the context of being committed to a particular community.

"Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us." Those are Paul's words to the Christians at Philippi. The apostle sounds full of pride and self-proclaiming. Imitate me! Look at those who are living by our example! Take them as your models. As Joe Nelson taught us in his first class on Paul last week, Paul's seemingly self-proclaiming statements are not that at all. Paul is really saying, "Join in imitating me as I am imitating Jesus Christ!" Paul is so deeply convinced of God's love focused and made freely available in Christ, he is so given over body and soul to that good news, that he can confidently say to others, "Come, join me on this path of life, real life, true life, life that doesn't disappoint and that is everlasting!" This IS the journey of a lifetime. Rachel has been on this journey for many years. Now she has made the express commitment to imitate Christ in the company of this community of faith and its vision and mission. So we need to ask ourselves in light of her commitment today, "Where am I in my commitment to imitating Christ, to taking on that disciplined, intentional life of faith that puts me on the journey of my own spiritual growth and specific service in the world?"

What about this word "imitate"? It sounds like pretending to be something we aren't or woodenly copying someone else's life. But that's not the meaning of the word Paul uses. "Imitate" (*summimnatai*) has a richer, fuller meaning in the Greek and in the context Paul uses it. It means having a similar form. It means being transformed in a certain direction, in Paul's case, being transformed into the form of Jesus Christ.

But this is not taking on something that is foreign to us. It is an imitating that brings out our true humanity, our true selves. It is an imitating, a following that puts us in deeper touch with what is true and lasting, with God.

Perhaps the most famous use of this word “imitate” in Christian tradition is by Thomas a Kempis, who around 1427 completed his book The Imitation of Christ. Thomas was convinced that the simple and clear following of Christ’s life and teachings resulted in a fully enlightened life. A couple of brief readings from this book:

*He who follows Me, says Christ our Saviour, walks not in darkness, for he will have the light of life. These are the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by them we are admonished to follow His teachings and His manner of living, if we would truly be enlightened and delivered from all blindness of heart. (p. 31)*

*We ought every day to renew our purpose in God, and to stir our heart to fervor and devotion, as though it were the first day of our conversion. (p. 53)*

Thomas a Kempis understood that imitation of Christ is nothing like trying to be something or someone we are not. And it is by no means superficial. Imitating Christ means letting our lives be transformed so that the very truth of our being is brought forth, nourished, and bears fruit in and for the world. But Thomas, like Paul, understood that this doesn’t take place without effort, without taking upon ourselves a life of intention, of discipline, of practice, so that we place ourselves in the shaping, transforming reach of God’s Spirit. That’s what it means to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ. That is what was expressed fifty years ago in the statement of membership for this church, “Our Covenant One with Another.” It is a way offered, a way of following Christ, of awakening to who we really are and giving to the world what we are truly meant to give.

I visited a friend recently who will begin chemotherapy for cancer in a short while. He doesn’t know if the treatment will be successful and will not have any way of knowing except by the number of days or years that lie ahead. Facing the reality of our deaths, the reality of the brevity of our lives in this world, brings us up short. It makes us think, not with our heads, but with our souls. What is my life about? What have I been spending my time, money, and energy on? What is really important in life? When we face up to reality, to what in

old religious language is called the “transitory nature of life,” it brings things into focus. What am I wasting my time on? What am I allowing to eat up my life and energy and resources, things that don’t really matter? How am I going to live my life so that I really live, so that my life is full and meaningful?

These are basic and critical questions. The life of spiritual commitment is an answer to them, a way of living so that we find for ourselves what is real, what is true, what is lasting. It is the way of what we call the inward journey of prayer and the outward journey of service in the world. It is the way of imitating Christ. And as Paul wrote, this imitating of Christ means God’s transforming of our humble lives into the glorious life that we see and know in Jesus himself.

God’s blessing on you, Rachel, as you renew your life in Christ through commitment to Covenant Membership.

God’s blessing on each of us as we work with Christ’s call to us, as we commit our lives to the imitation of him who leads us to eternal life, both now and forever.