

Rev. Lynne Ogren  
October 22, 2017

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year A  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The more time we spend with someone the more of their habits or expressions we pick up—for good or for bad!

My grandpa used to tell the story of the time when my dad was little, just learning to walk and talk. It was in the time of the Depression so Grandpa moved the family to Oklahoma to live with other family members and they were trying to make a go of farming. Little Lawrence followed his daddy around the farm and one day Grandpa heard his toddler imitating the same words he was using. Well, they weren't very appropriate words for a child, as you might imagine! Grandpa decided right then that he couldn't talk like that anymore, and I never did hear my dad use any kind of foul language.

We imitate others in order to learn all kinds of things. Over these first couple of years here in Montana I have noticed some of the things you teach your kids that I never experienced growing up. One of them is dancing! Last year we went to the New Year's Eve dance at the fairgrounds. I saw daddies with their little girls getting them used to the rhythm of the 2-step. I watched a mom teach her teenage son how to do some of those complicated twirls. They were practicing on the edge of the hall. After it seemed like the boy had it down, Mom brought in a teenage girl. The boy and girl practiced a few times and then headed to the dancefloor!

Maybe you can think of other things you learned by imitating an instructor or a mentor or a friend. Think about how you learned about cooking or mechanics or sewing or fishing. What's that old adage? Give me a fish and I eat for a day. Teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime.

When we learn from others who know more than we do we can eventually carry on that skill for ourselves, and even pass it along to others.

In his letter to the Thessalonians Paul praises the church for imitating him and the other evangelists, Silvanus and Timothy who had brought the word of God to them initially, and then for becoming an example of faith to others. They learned how to live as Christians by imitating Christians and then passed on that way of life to people in other churches.

But our life of faith is more than just practice. It is more than a skill. Being a Christian is about becoming a new person altogether. It is a transformation of the heart that then transforms our way of life.

In the gospel reading those who are trying to trap Jesus into giving them a reason to arrest him ask whether or not he thinks paying taxes is "lawful." If he says no he will speak against the Herodians, the allies of Rome. If he says yes, he will speak against the Pharisees, the keepers of God's law. As Jesus often does, he provides a third answer by asking a question.

He asks about the image on a coin. It is the face of the emperor Caesar Augustus. In Greek the word for image is *ikon*. We use the word icon today to refer to a picture that represents something or someone. Since that coin had Caesar's icon or image on it, it came to represent the political realm, a realm in which taxes paid for armies and roads and the empire's infrastructure, as well as filling the emperor's pockets!

So Jesus says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's..." In other words, in this kingdom, there are rules to be followed and as a citizen of that kingdom it is important to follow them. But then he goes on to say, "...and [give] to God the things that are God's."

Now if we know that we give to the emperor the things that have the emperor's image on them, what are we to give to God? Where do we find God's image?

Let's jump back to Genesis 1:26. When the Greeks translated the Old Testament they wrote, "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our *ikon*, according to our likeness...'"

Humanity is the icon of God. If we are to give to God the things that are God's we are to give to God ourselves...our whole selves...our family life, our work life, our play life, our friendships, our habits and our hobbies...all of these are to be given to God because God gives us all of who we are as a gift.

Paul saw in this group of believers the understanding that they were a living representation, icons, of the living and true God, inspired by—breathing the very breath of—the Holy Spirit. From this they were moved to proclaim the word of the Lord Jesus by becoming an example for other believers to imitate.

This is why the church has continued over the centuries. God knew that we would need one another, to learn from one another, to be in relationship with other believers who we could imitate as we grow in the faith into which we were birthed at Holy Baptism.

Some of our staff members and I are reading a book about what it means for the church to be about the task of what the author calls "Vibrant Faith Formation."<sup>1</sup> David Anderson writes that vibrant faith formation comes through "personal, trusted relationships."

Think for a moment about the people in your life who have served as your examples in faith. *Wait*

Who are they?            *Receive answers*

These are the people you imitated. You listened to them. You watched them and learned from them and have tried to follow them. These were your Thessalonians!! As much as we love these mentors of the faith, we love them because they helped us imitate the one in whose image we are made—Jesus Christ, God with us.

If it is still possible, let's find a way to thank these examples of faith in our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, David, *From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith: The Role of the Home in Renewing the Church*, ©2010 Vibrant Faith Ministry.

Now, who do you know as the next Thessalonians? Who can you encourage as they live and grow as followers of Jesus and children of God? Paul gives us an example to follow in building up the body of Christ by recognizing the ways people are shining the light of God's love to the world. Who might you encourage today?

And when you go home and look in the mirror, give thanks to God for making you in God's own image. Let us give to God the things that are God's—let us give to God our lives.

Thanks be to God! Amen