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Lent 2C • February 28, 2010
Philippians 3:17 – 4:1

What person has made the strongest impact on your life so far? Who has been a mentor or model in your life?

Around the turn of the 18th century, Charles Caleb Colton said: “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” That certainly seems to be the case. Our choices for mentors or guides reflect our primary influences and our goals in life.

We all have mentors or teachers, relatives or friends, who serve as models of life for us. Sometimes we are oblivious to the guides that we choose. They are subtle influences on our sub-conscious. At other times we are very intentional about who we imitate. We seek to live and be like someone in our class at school, or a leader who we respect. Some times we can put a lot of pressure on ourselves to be perfect imitators.

I get a kick out of Saint Paul telling his congregations, “Imitate me!” It ends up sounding a bit inflated. But his advice was no because he was egotistical – or that he demanded perfection of his flock. It was grounded in concern for his congregation. He was worried about the influence of other teachers upon his flock.

He was reminding them about what they learned when he was with them. The ground of their teaching was in his congregation's new identity in Christ.

He points them at the beginning of their faith journeys. Their identity as Christians is rooted in Christ Jesus, which has certain implications. Like Paul, "Christ Jesus has made [them – and us] his own" – in the waters of baptism. *(Phil 3:12)* We didn't initiate the process. We didn't ask for it. God reached into our lives to welcome us and love us. Our primary identities changed in that moment. Jesus claimed us to be members of the family of God – and participants in God's kingdom.

Now, "our citizenship is in heaven..." *(Phil 3:20)* The lens that we view our world through is not just in our identity as American citizens. We understand meaning in our lives through our faith. That's why our worship space is filled with Christian symbols. We follow the cross as it enters, and there is a cross at our altar. The banners along the sides are filled with different symbols of our faith. As citizens of heaven, "it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." *(Phil 3:20)* The language of "Savior" makes it clear that we are not doing anything to earn the saving. A Savior is one without whom salvation could not occur.

The life of faith in Christ is not about what we do to make ourselves worthy of God. It is not about what we can do to be perfect. It's about Christ, and how his death on the cross and his resurrection draw us into God's household. Grace and love is poured upon us without our invitation – without any personal achievement. This sets us on a journey in faith. We have journeys in school and work, with ways that we must measure up. Faith in Christ is not a journey with a list of things that must be done. For Christ is the one who starts us on the path, whose Spirit guides us along the way, and whose Father speaks to us through the Word.

We may not know much about what will happen on our journey in faith, but we do know that we will be changed. Paul wrote, “He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.” *(Phil 3:21)*

The action is all God's. The Holy Spirit will make us worthy and perfect in ways that we could never do ourselves. Any righteousness that we have is Christ's – and we receive it as a gift when we are joined to Christ in baptism.

It sounds like we are to do nothing at all. God is the one moving in our lives. God is the one making us into new creations. God is the one drawing us together, through our unity with Christ.

Yet we haven't been given a heavenly call in Christ. *(Phil 3:14)* We are to set our minds on this call – on Christ and on his ways. *(Phil 3:20)* To set our minds on Christ includes the cross. There are many folks who would rather not think about the cross as a part of their faith. Who would rather celebrate the peace of Christ and the glory of the risen Lord, and ignore the rest. Paul wrote:

“For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.” *(Phil 3:18-19)*

Our Savior in heaven is not all wonder and glory. When we ignore the cross, we ignore the reason that we receive all our blessings. We miss a central part of God's character, which was revealed in Jesus Christ. We worship a God: who loves by being willing to be vulnerable; who is attentive to others' needs and serves them; who suffers abuse and death, just as we do. The wonder and glory, the peace and resurrection, are only meaningful in the context of our broken world.

The transformation that God brings to our lives is only meaningful because we are fallible, broken people. Perfection is impossible – though some times I wish it were within reach! Perfection is impossible, apart from the grace of God. And even then, perfection is a different picture than our world paints. It is not about appearing

to be superhuman. God's perfection is not juggling all our commitments and relationships with movie-star ease. It's not having a perfect home or a TV-ready family life.

No, perfection in the Spirit is having a life that imitates Christ. One who imitates Jesus has a mind in unity with others in Christ's Spirit (*Phil 3:15*) –dedication that stands firm (*Phil 4:1*) in faith – and a heart that strives to live into the call that God has on our lives (*Phil 3:13-14*). Imitating Christ calls us to certain behaviors in our lives now. We are called to emulate Christ's humility, and his earnest care for and service to others. We remember our own imperfections, and the grace and love that God has shown to us despite them. And we try to live that grace and love in our own lives.

Our imitation of faithful Christians, like Paul – and of Jesus himself – is a way that we participate in the work that God is doing in us. It is our response to God's call. It prepares us for what God's perfection will actually look like.

Let us pray. We give thanks, O God, for the gift of your grace. We pray that you would guide our footsteps as disciples. Help us to imitate your Son in ways that are difficult for us. And prepare us to be transformed into perfect images of you in our world. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.