***LIKE MINDS LIKE…***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

September 27, 2020

Texts: Philippians 2:1-15 and Matthew 20:25-28

Who do you want to be like when you grow up, even if you are grown up? A retired teacher told me that she wanted to be like Kitty Farrier who had been a great role model for her as a young teacher. Another said, “I want to be like Bobbye D’Orsi, because she was so much fun!” If you could choose one person to emulate, just one, who would it be – a childhood hero, a professional mentor, a famous world figure, or someone else? To be like that person would you want his or her mind or body or character or achievements or all of the above? Who would you want to be like, if you were to be like someone else? Because I am asking the question from this pulpit beneath this cross on a Sunday morning having just read a passage from Philippians where Paul says, “let the same mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus,” most of you are probably jumping to a conclusion: the answer must be Jesus. It is like that children’s message in which the pastor asked the kids, “What is gray, has a bushy tail, eats nuts, and lives in the woods?” A bright young child replied, “Well, it sounds like a squirrel, but since we’re in church the answer must be Jesus.” Before you make that your answer, you might want to stop for a moment and consider what that answer might mean.

In his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, theologian Marcus Borg describes Jesus as

*a spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet, and movement founder who invited his followers and hearers into a transforming relationship with the same Spirit that he himself knew, and into a community whose social vision was shaped by the core value of compassion*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

All of those descriptions have a basis in Scripture. Jesus is the *man* filled with the power of God’s spirit, the *teacher* whose wisdom confounded and enraged the Jewish establishment, the *prophet* who told of a heavenly kingdom in which the first would be last and the last first, the *cornerstone* of a church that seeks to transform lives within and outside its walls 2000 years after Jesus’ death. Is that the person you want to be like? Jesus was all of those things – and more. Writer Philip Yancey describes him as a sinless friend of sinners, the God-Man, the wounded healer.[[2]](#endnote-2) John Dominic Crossan calls him the announcer of the unmediated Kingdom of God.[[3]](#endnote-3) In our confessions he is called savior; judge; prophet, priest and king; Son of God; Redeemer of God’s elect; the Christ. The earliest Christian confession simply said: *Jesus is Lord*. All of these are rooted in the testimony of Scripture. Each describes Jesus. Which Jesus do you want to be like? And if you want to be like Jesus, what are you supposed to do – be a prophet, a priest, a king, a healer, a crucified criminal, a savior – all of the above?

In his letter to the Philippians Paul urges them to be of one mind, and that mind is the mind of Christ. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*, he says. In other words, think like Jesus, love like Jesus, be faithful like Jesus, be like Jesus, but do not try to BE Jesus. We are not called to be mini-messiahs. There are already too many people in the world with messiah complexes – those who think they are here to save the world, those who believe that they suffer for the world, those who claim to have all the answers, those who see themselves as 21st century messiahs. To all those faux messiahs I say this: *The world has only one messiah. And it ain’t you!* To be like Jesus is not to be Jesus. He alone is fully God and fully human. He alone is the savior of the world. We can strive to be ***like*** Jesus without being Jesus. We can only try to do what he would do in whatever situation we face, and seek to have the same mind as Christ. To do so, begin with humility, says Paul. That may seem a strange place to begin in order to be like the Son of God, Lord of all, the one without whom nothing was created that was created. But it is the place where Jesus begins: by humbling himself.

In his book *Barefoot Disciple*, Stephen Cherry reflects on that humility which we are to emulate in these words:

*Humility is most Christlike when it combines a certain down-to-earth acceptance of reality with a passionate longing for God’s kingdom of justice, truth, mercy and peace.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

Coming down to earth is exactly what Christ did for us – God became human in a great mystery of faith that is beyond our understanding but not beyond our belief! In Jesus, God came to us, took our flesh and blood form, and gave up a divine home to come into the rough and tumble world of the Middle East with a message of salvation. Could God have done it some other way? Perhaps, but God chose to enter our human predicament as a child in an out-of-the-way stable in Bethlehem. The choirs of angels sang their alleluias and glorias, but Jesus came into the world in a less glorious way – the child not of a queen or a princess, but of a peasant girl. *Conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary* – is what we say. *Fully human and fully God* – is what it means.

The Word became flesh and lived among us; he is Immanuel, ‘God with us’. He shall be called Son of the Most High. The Gospel writers have a variety of ways of expressing the same thing, but that thing they are expressing is that in Jesus God came among us, not as a God among humans, but as a human who is also God. Greek mythology has a number of sons of gods and humans – demi-gods who live in the world. Each is a little bigger than life. But none is like Christ; none is willing to shed his divinity to become fully human, none is willing to be killed in order that we might live. It is that great sacrifice, the shedding of the vestiges of divinity in order to become human, the giving up of divine power to be a man in our midst that is so remarkable. It is the humility of one who, according to the Christ hymn in Philippians

*did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave to be born in human likeness*.

It is that example we are to follow – humbling ourselves to be like the Word made flesh, the God made human. It is not easy. As the country song says:

*O Lord it’s hard to be humble, when you’re perfect in every way.*

*I can’t wait to look in the mirror, ‘cause I get better looking each day.*

*To know me is to love me. I must be a [heck] of a man.*

*O Lord, it’s hard to be humble, but I’m doing the best that I can.*[[5]](#endnote-5)

It is hard to be humble, and harder yet to be genuinely humble. Such humility is not the false humility of one who denies she can do anything well in order to garner praise or excuse inaction. This is not humility that denies true gifts in order to avoid serving. This is humility that willingly and lovingly serves God and others, humility that regards no one as being a lesser person and nothing as being unworthy of her efforts if it serves the purposes of God. This is humility that surrenders self to the glory of God and is willing to be last in order to serve.

Such humility is not really in vogue these days. We have narcissistic leaders who tout their own accomplishments, speak authoritatively on things they know nothing about, proclaim themselves geniuses, and belittle as “losers” those who serve selflessly. We have television preachers who promote themselves more than they promote the gospel and claim that God wants you to be rich rather than a humble servant. We are inundated with media stars who battle for the spotlight in order to be seen and heard even if they have nothing to say. None of that preening and boasting and self-promotion and name-calling and arrogance is true to the gospel. For that was not the example of Jesus! Mohandas Gandhi is reported to have said “*I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ*.”[[6]](#endnote-6) It is all too true. We are often not very Christlike! We should be enough like Christ that the world can see something of Jesus in us, and if we are to be like him, then we must be humble servants, one and all!

Jesus told a parable about such humility. It is the parable of two men who went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee proudly thanked God that he was a righteous man, not like the lowly tax collector. The lowly tax collector simply cried, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” Yet it was the tax collector who went home justified, says Jesus. The tax collector went home in right relationship with God, for it was the humility of the tax collector, not the self-righteous pride of the Pharisee, that was pleasing to God, “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

If you want to be like Jesus then begin by being humbler. Begin by thinking of others first, by living for others first, by living out your life in trembling awe of the power of God, rather than thinking that you know better than God what is good for your life. Begin by having like minds like Jesus! If that seems to be asking too much, then how can you call yourself Christian? Toyohiko Kagawa famously said, “*I read once in a book that a man called Christ went about doing good. It distresses me that I am so easily satisfied with just going about*." Too often we are content with just going through the motions, rather than earnestly trying to be like Christ. It is not an easy path, for if we are to be like him, then we must do as he did: humble ourselves and serve. A Native American proverb says: “*It is not enough for a man to know how to ride, he must also know how to fall*.” If you would be like Jesus then you begin by falling off your high horse and being humble, by regarding others as better than you are. That doesn’t mean denying that you have any value, but it might mean listening more patiently and serving more joyfully and loving more consistently and sacrificing more willingly in order to be obedient to the God who was willing to become humbly human so that you might be saved. Most Americans want to be like someone high and mighty or rich and famous or tremendously talented, but those who call themselves Christian, truly Christian, want something else: to be humble – like Jesus. How about you? Amen

1. Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994, p.119 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1995, pp.257-274 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Dominic Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, HarperSanFrancisco: 1994, p.198 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Stephen Cherry, *Barefoot Disciple*, Continuum Publishing: New York, 2011, p.43 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mac Davis, *O Lord It’s Hard to Be Humble* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Mohandas Gandhi quoted by Gilberto Collazo in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol.4, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor eds., Westminster John Knox Press:2011, p.110 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)