



“A Faithful Impersonation”

Text: Philippians 2:1-13

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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There was a time when one of the most popular forms of entertainment was to see an impressionist. I'm not talking about going to an art gallery to see the works of Pissarro, Monet, Renoir, Degas, or Cassatt. I'm talking about people like Rich Little and Frank Gorshin. These were old Las Vegas superstars who could change their voices to sound like other people. They would do impression after impression – John Wayne, Johnny Caron, Jimmy Stewart, Kirk Douglas, Cary Grant, the list went on and on. And people paid to see and hear this kind of entertainment, even though after a while, they all began to sound the same.

Then there are the impersonators. An impersonator does not merely attempt to sound like a person. An impersonator becomes that person. A couple of weeks ago, I read the news that Hal Holbrook was retiring from his production of “Mark Twain Tonight” after 63 years, which is longer than Twain was on the public stage. I am a huge fan of Holbrook's and through the generosity of Suzanne Aiken, Wendy and I were able to join him for dinner after a performance in Evansville, and we were able to go back stage to see him again after a performance in Henderson.

In order to become Twain, Holbrook studied him and has become one of the nation's preeminent Twain scholars. When he began “Mark Twain Tonight,” he was a young man and it took him four hours to apply the hair and makeup to become a 70 year old man. He'll tell you now that it doesn't take him that long. He's got it down to about two hours.

He watched the few silent movies of Twain that survive and figured out his walk. He figured out a voice that combined a Missouri twang, seasoned with a little New England sound. He read the reviews of Twain's lectures and incorporated Twain's habit of lounging around the stage into his performance.

The end result is that when you saw Holbrook do Twain, you forgot that you were seeing Holbrook and you were convinced that you were, in fact, spending a couple of hours with Mark Twain. It was not an impression. It was, in the fullest sense of the word, an impersonation. Hal Holbrook became Mark Twain.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, we read this amazing sentence:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,
and live in love, as Christ loved us

and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.
(Eph. 5:1)

There's a challenge! Imitate God! Can you even imagine!

Still, when you stop to think about it, isn't that what we are really called to do? We are called to imitate - to impersonate - God in all that we do. Of course it's a daunting challenge. And, of course, we can't really be God. But we are called to offer the world a faithful imitation - an impersonation - of God, in our words and in our actions.

The author of Ephesians gives us a good starting point: "live in love, as Christ loved us." The key to impersonating God is love. We've got to learn how to love, not only those it is easy to love, but to love those that are especially hard to love. And remember, this is not some sentimental, sappy version of love. This is a love that seeks the best for another, a love that forgives wrongdoing, a love that brings wholeness and peace, a love that builds up another and empowers them to be the person God created them to be. "Live in love, as Christ loved us." The words are easy to say, but it's a whole other thing to actually bring those words to life.

If only we had a model, someone who actually did that.

In our principle text for the day, the passage from the Letter to the Philippians, we are given some further instruction.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Put away divisions and separation and live in unity. Practice a genuine humility. Put the needs and cares of another over your own needs and cares. The guideline is there to "living in love, as Christ loved us." Of course, it's easier said than done. But here it is, in simple and plain language.

And then, as if to illustrate the point, the words of what was most likely an early church hymn, are inserted in the Letter to the Philippians.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

So it seems that there is a model to his new life to which we are called.
The model is Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not deny his identity as a child of God. He did not think it something to be held so tightly that it had to be pried from his hands. Instead, “he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being found in human likeness.” That word we translate “emptied,” is a word in Greek that means “to pour out.” Jesus poured himself out, in order to demonstrate with complete clarity the very nature of God. Once we have that idea firmly implanted in our minds, only then can we begin to understand that Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Jesus is teaching us that God holds nothing back in practicing love and that we are called to hold nothing back in living that same love. “What’s in it for me?” may be a question the world around us teaches us to ask, but it is not a question with which Jesus is familiar. The question Jesus seems to be asking is, “what’s in it for the other?”

Some of the most difficult work we will ever do is to learn to put ego aside and consider the other. We are trained from our earliest days to advance our own cause, to better ourselves, to climb the ladders of prominence and success, to amass power, wealth, and prestige. And then along comes this ancient teaching that tells us to pour ourselves out for others, to hold nothing back, to put the needs of the other ahead of our own. It is terribly confusing. I know. But there is a reason we call it “the word of life.”

This Friday evening past, at the Erev Yom Kippur service at Temple Adath B’nai Israel, Rabbi Gary Mazo began his sermon with this story. I’m going to share it with you as we end this sermon.

Two rabbis were walking along, talking together. A poor, disheveled woman, carrying her grocery bags, approached the rabbis. She pulled from one of her bags a chicken. She asked the rabbis, "Is this chicken kosher?" One of the rabbis took the chicken and began his investigation. He looked the chicken over, inside and out. He handed the chicken back to the woman and said, "this chicken is not kosher." The woman was crestfallen and discouraged. She handed the chicken to the other rabbi. The rabbi looked at the woman for a few moments, then began his examination of the chicken. He looked at the woman again, and pronounced the chicken kosher. How could this be? One says not kosher. One says kosher. Rabbi Mazo said, "the difference is that one rabbi looked at the chicken. The other rabbi looked at the woman."

When we look at others, and really look, we can begin to see their brokenness, their pain, their sorrow. And in that moment, we are called to offer a faithful impersonation of our God, an impersonation grounded in love, compassion, understanding, and grace. And if you need a reference point, imagine Jesus in that same situation. Follow his lead. Do as he would do. Speak as he would speak. Pour yourself out for the other.

On this Sunday, when we gather around the Table of the Lord, when we commit ourselves to peace and the work of peacemaking, we are reminded to live our faith and live our love of God and neighbor. We are reminded to pour ourselves out for another. We are reminded to imitate God in our words and actions. We are called to embody God's love in all that we do. In the bread and wine, we are nourished for this life-saving, life-giving work. And if there was ever a need for faithful impersonations of God, that time is now. And forevermore. Amen.



609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

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