

CONVENTION ESSAY

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JESUS IS A BROTHER WORTH IMITATING

When I was a child, my bedtime prayer included these words: "Jesus, Savior, wash away all that has been wrong today. Help me everyday to be, good and gentle, *more like thee*." I rarely say that prayer anymore, though I don't have a good reason not to. After all, why wouldn't I or anyone else here today want to be more like Jesus? If there's anyone whose example is worthy to be followed, it's Jesus! We readily can confess that "Jesus is a brother worth imitating." Yet even those who have a false view of what Jesus was might say the same thing. Think of the atheist professor at the local public university who teaches his class that Jesus Christ is someone worth imitating because he was a great teacher. Think of the preacher at "St. Mary's Lutheran Church" down the street (not WELS) who proclaims from the pulpit that Jesus is a brother worth imitating because he showed us how to earn God's favor. Think of the world-renowned "scholar" on the research committee at some big, national Bible seminar who concludes that Jesus is a brother worth imitating because he showed us how we can achieve our own personal divinity. Why should it ever be that we who know the real reasons why Jesus is a brother worth imitating would find it difficult to do so, or would rarely even think about being more like him?

It can be difficult! How in the world are we supposed to imitate God? How do we who sin all the time imitate someone that never sinned even one time? How do we imitate someone we've never seen or heard in person? How do we talk about being like Jesus without sounding like pietists or legalists, which is what became of many other well-meaning Christians in the past? Perhaps we're even afraid that if we try to be more like Jesus our manhood may be threatened!

The struggles we face in this or any matter of sanctification are properly addressed by only one source--the Word! The Word shows us why Jesus is a brother worth imitating, how to imitate him, and where we get the strength to imitate him. The Word is that source because it tells us what Jesus did for us and what God has promised to accomplish among us. As is true with any attempt at encouraging pious living, the focus of an essay like this must be based on what God's law and gospel say to us. It is my prayer that the gospel message will once again move us who call Jesus our "brother" to imitate him, and that it will move us who call Jesus our "Savior" to worship him.

When it comes to imitating a person, we humans usually focus on what we see. That's especially true of children. Have you seen the commercial on TV that features all sorts of children singing about being "like Mike"? It's amazing to me how much popularity that man has gained! You know who I'm talking about. I don't have to mention his full name. As a basketball coach I can verify that many of our youth do indeed try to be like Mike, whether they copy his flashy moves or just the shoes he wears. But Mike certainly isn't the only celebrity that children imitate. They may have other favorite athletes or may like other celebrities from the various fields of entertainment. Children have even been known to imitate their parents or their teachers on occasion! Naturally, we adults are concerned about who it is that our children imitate, since they see plenty of bad behavior along with the good. Consequently, there are some things about celebrities, or athletes, or parents and teachers that we wouldn't want our children to imitate!

That is not the case with our brother Jesus, however. Everything about Jesus is good, since he never sinned, and since he is the only human being who is also God in the same person. We were reminded of this important teaching of Scripture in yesterday's essay. The difficulties we encounter in seeking to imitate Jesus are never the result of his character. The difficulties come from our inability

ity to imitate him completely. We've never seen him. We can't watch him on TV. It's really hard to visualize how Jesus would act in the modern world! So when it comes to imitating Jesus, the temptation exists to formulate our own ideas of what that means. That has led to problems in the past with many who have tried to foster better Christian living. Any emphasis on human effort rather than God's complete effort creates a problem. Any emphasis on the Jesus "in us" more than Jesus "for us" creates a problem. No sinful man can do anything God-pleasing without faith in what Jesus did. That's why the gospel must be the underlying base for any act of sanctification, any attempt at piety, including any attempt to imitate Jesus.

Let's look at a few examples of attempts at piety that fell off that base to some degree or another. The work of Thomas a' Kempis comes to mind in this regard. Here's a man who actually wrote a book on imitating Jesus! Notice I said "a" book, not "the" book. He wrote a book entitled "De Imitatione Christi" over five hundred years ago. Thomas a' Kempis was a monk of the Augustinian Order who spent a great deal of his time in the monastery copying the Bible and other books. His book "De Imitatione Christi" was intended to be about "copying" the life of Christ, and it became so popular during his time (and thereafter) that it is said to have been the second most widely-read book next to the Bible. In my opinion, however, I wouldn't list it as recommended reading for learning how to imitate Jesus. I say that not because he wrote it in Latin. There's nothing wrong with Latin! You can read it in the English version now, anyway. I say that even though I have not read the book in its entirety. I say that, however, after reading enough of it to detect that it primarily reflects the religious thought of a typical medieval monk, a monk who was also given to "mystic" ideas, a monk who adhered to fifteenth-century Roman Catholic dogma for achieving piety. "De Imitatione Christi" is more about copying the thoughts of Thomas a' Kempis than it is about copying Christ. Granted, much of what he says isn't false. He's quoted quite often by Christians still today! In fact, I recently heard a quote from Thomas a' Kempis in a sermon at a WELS graduation service. But his work is so law-oriented. It's so geared towards personal effort. It highlights Christian virtues more than it does the grace of God. It proposes achieving harmony with God based on what a person should avoid rather than on what Jesus did. After he quotes this passage from John's Gospel, "He who follows me will never walk in darkness," Thomas thereafter hardly mentions again what Jesus did or what he was like! As is true of so many attempts over the ages at improving piety, his work is a series of do's and don'ts intended to endear a person to God. "Truly, deep words do not make a holy man and just. It is a virtuous life that makes a man dear to God," says Thomas (Book I, Paragraph III).

Statements like that indicate clearly where the focus lies in Thomas' attempt at teaching piety. Though he is correct in saying that deep words don't make a man holy and just, he is incorrect in asserting that a virtuous life does bring that about. A man's life of sanctification does not and cannot endear himself to God. A man's life of sanctification is a response to God calling us "dear" as a result of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Our brother became our brother, in the flesh, to accomplish that most important task. He "imitated" us, in a way, by becoming human, in order to take our place and fulfill the Father's demands of payment for sin. That work of Jesus' is the only reason why God holds us dear. And that work of Jesus alone is the reason why you and I want to imitate him today. That's what we might call a "gospel-oriented" approach to piety.

We Lutherans have always stressed the tremendous importance of distinguishing between law and gospel. We realize the tremendous danger that exists when those two doctrines are confused or co-mingled. We've seen from church history how an emphasis on law-motivation versus gospel-motivation in matters of piety has led to some damaging effects on the church. That's why it is important to remember that church practice always should spring from a solid doctrinal base. Dogmaticians such as Francis Pieper made that emphasis quite clear in their writings with such statements as this: "While the Law thus reveals sin (mirror), restrains the flesh (curb), and guides

the Christian to good works (rule), the power to accomplish sanctification and to do good works comes alone from the Gospel (Christian Dogmatics, p. 390)." Since we want to imitate Jesus in a proper manner, we examine carefully any proposed method that is intended to help us do so. The method that Thomas a' Kempis proposed, though filled with wise words and virtuous thoughts, falls into the category of law-motivation.

So also did the method prescribed by the "Enthusiasts" of Luther's day, who were cited in the various "Lutheran Confessions," have an improper focus. They shifted their focus from the means of grace to personal efforts. These are the people who taught, among other things, that one could "pray" himself to better living. Likewise the pietists that came after Luther's time fell off center as they stressed works of piety above the teachings of Scripture. These are the people who reacted to what they called "dead orthodoxy," whose creed may be summarized with the phrase "deeds not creeds!" In both of these last instances it was a misplaced emphasis on sanctification above justification that produced the improprieties amid the good intentions.

Luther was one of those who was very careful to focus on the gospel when talking about pious living. He had experienced firsthand the discomfort that comes with an emphasis on pleasing the Almighty to earn the Almighty's love. Commenting on that same passage from John that Thomas a' Kempis cited in his book, "He who follows me will never walk in darkness," Luther said this: "Who is able to follow Christ? Some refer this to works and example, and this is called following Christ. No, Christ draws the pupils to himself...To follow Christ means to obey his words, to proclaim that he suffered and died for us; it means to obey his words by faith (LW, Vol. 23, p. 325)." While Luther does say that to follow Christ is "to obey," which is law, notice that the obedience comes from faith--faith in what Jesus has done. It is true that we do the act of following, but it is Jesus who first draws us to himself through the gospel. While a pietist likes to "draw lines" where God hasn't and say that this or that is proper behavior, the gospel tells us that Jesus has drawn a line from us sinners directly to himself because of his love. While some try to turn Jesus into another Moses, so to speak, and treat him as a second law-giver...while some turn him into a watchdog that barks at Christians when they teeter on the fence built around forbidden territory, the gospel reminds us that Jesus has atoned for those who have broken God's law and restores those who have trespassed. While many speculate as to how Jesus would behave in situations that he himself never faced, the gospel tells us that what Jesus did for us is the pattern we use and apply no matter what the situation may be today.

What do you think about those WWJD bracelets that are so popular these days? Do you see them as a helpful tool for imitating Jesus? I personally don't. I want to be careful, however, in what I say about them because I know that there are people in our own "circles" who wear them. I've heard that our own publishing house distributes them. Plus, I don't want to end up being legalistic or judgmental myself since I've already warned against that earlier. I gather that for some it may be simply fashionable to wear one. I think that's true of many of the kids I see wearing them. For others it may actually serve as a helpful reminder to praise their Savior. It might even just be more of a personal thing with me because I don't like wearing jewelry of any kind (except for my wedding ring!). I don't even wear a cross, even though I think that the cross is a very fitting symbol for the Christian who wants to praise his Savior.

At any rate, let's explore this issue a bit. It's a timely example for application. I'm told by those who wear the bracelet that the letters WWJD stand for "What Would Jesus Do?" I've also heard that they could stand for "Walk with Jesus daily," or "Watch while Jordan dunks." But let's assume that the people who created the item intended the letters to mean "What Would Jesus Do?" It seems that if you analyze the question you are often left without a clear answer and end up making a judgment call of your own. We simply don't know what Jesus would do in many of the situations that arise in our lives because...well, we aren't Jesus! Nor is it wise to try to make Jesus fit into

unrealistic situations that he didn't face because then you have to guess or determine by logic what Jesus would actually do. This line of thinking could then result in fitting Jesus into the role of someone that "guilts" us into an act of righteousness. He's our brother, not a tyrant! It can also lead to legalism in that a person may conclude that Jesus would do this or that in a given situation and thereby a law has been created that applies to everyone. Too much is left to the discretion of the individual in such a case, whereas the gospel is certain. What Jesus did is never the subject of speculation. Wondering what Jesus would do is very speculative.

A youngster might ask, "What would Jesus do if someone hit him in the face (like Johnny just did) and wasn't sorry for what he'd done? Would Jesus say 'I forgive you' right away? Would he shake his finger and yell? Would he demand an apology? What should I do?"

Let's say your thirteen-year-old daughter is at a gathering of friends and some of them start gossiping. She wonders, "What would Jesus do? I know he wouldn't like it. Would he say something? Would he just walk away and make his friends feel guilty for what they were doing, so then they'd stop? I don't know what exactly I should do, but I do know I feel really guilty right now! I think Jesus would just ignore them and change the subject. That's what I'll do. There, now I feel better!"

Let's say you're driving down the interstate, keeping a careful eye on that speedometer, and you notice that "everyone" else is flying by you like you're standing still. You think to yourself, "It sure is tempting to join them! I have important things to do, you know. Hmm...What would Jesus do? Would he honk at these law-breakers to let them know they shouldn't do that? Would he, perhaps, speed up just a little so he wouldn't create a hazard? Wait...if Jesus wouldn't speed, it must be sin for anyone to speed. Yikes! I know lots of people who speed all the time. It's as if obeying the speed limit is the exception, not the rule. But didn't Professor So-and-So say in dogmatics class that if everyone else around you is speeding, the loving thing to do is for you to speed up, too? Well, I wasn't so sure I agreed with him back then, and I'm not so sure I agree with that now, either. Plus, going slower helps conserve fuel. There, I'm at peace with my decision."

Here's one for all you smokers out there...What would Jesus do if he were offered a cigar? Would he refuse it because smoking a cigar would be harmful to his body? And if Jesus would do that, then is it a sin for anyone to smoke? Pastors and teachers...What would Jesus do with a call to serve somewhere other than his present call? What would be his criteria for making a decision? Do the criteria you use match up with what Jesus would use? Husbands...fathers...What would Jesus do with all the decisions you have to make? After all, Jesus wasn't a husband or a father! (How do women apply this question?)

Let's not get too sidetracked here. The point I'm trying to make is this, that asking "What would Jesus do?" does not always sufficiently guide our behavior, while in some instances it may even guide us improperly. But again, I trust that those who wear these bracelets may not be so analytical as I've been and find a good use for them. As far as helpful tools for imitating our brother Jesus, however, there is better.

I apologize for taking so long to get at the main application. That's probably not a very "Lutheran" way to write an essay that is supposed to be practical in nature. It must be those Latin authors we study in class here at MLS that are rubbing off on me! Sometimes it's really hard to tell where they're headed in their ancient style of writing, and oftentimes they will reserve the main clause until the end! But we're not at the end yet, so let's turn now to the tool that is better than any other, the best tool there is for imitating Jesus, the Word itself.

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Eph. 5:1-2)

This is a passage that perhaps comes to mind first as we think about Scripture references applicable to this essay. It says "Be imitators." The Greek is "mimeo," from which we get words like "mimic" or "mimeograph." Very few passages are this specific about imitating God. Even though that word "God" in this passage would be properly understood as God the Father--since those addressed are referred to as "dearly loved children"--nevertheless Jesus has an important role in this command that Paul was inspired to give. We could first of all conclude that Jesus is involved because he, too, is God. Thus, to imitate God includes imitating Jesus. We know for sure that Jesus is involved because it is his love that is the example cited for what it means to imitate God. He is the one who has made God known to us. He is the one whose work made it possible for us to be called "children of God" in the first place, which is why we call him our "brother."

"Live a life of love," Paul says. That really is the definition for imitating God according to this passage. We who are "dearly loved" by God imitate him by living a life of love. Our brother Jesus, more than any other human being, shows us what true Christian love is all about! He loved us and gave himself *for us* as an offering and a sacrifice to God. That's what Jesus *did*, and that's gospel. That's why Jesus is a brother worth imitating. And that's our key to imitating God in general and our brother Jesus in particular.

How fitting that Paul immediately follows his command "Be imitators" with the words "as dearly loved children." The law that serves as our guide for Christian living is given in view of the fact that God has already loved us and made us his own. Because we are dearly loved, we imitate God. We don't imitate God to become dearly loved, as Thomas a' Kempis would have asserted. We respond to God's love with our efforts to be like him, like our brother Jesus. "We love, because he first loved us," says John.

The love that Jesus showed is a giving (agape), sacrificing kind of love. That kind of love displayed itself most vividly when Jesus was crucified. We're told in Scripture, "No greater love has anyone than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." That is what we might call the "ultimate sacrifice." That's what Jesus did on the cross. That's something that none of us has probably ever had to do. But whenever I think about that passage, I always think back to an incident where someone did give his life for another. It occurred in Mequon when I was a senior at the Sem. It happened on a Sunday afternoon. A man had robbed a store and then, while being pursued by the police, took a young girl hostage. The car in which the criminal and his hostage were sitting had become surrounded by police squad cars, and a standoff was in process. The Mequon chief of police, Thomas Buntrock, offered to trade places with the girl and make himself the hostage instead. The trade was made, the girl was now safe. As the standoff continued, a gunshot was later heard coming from the car in which the criminal and the chief were sitting. As was discovered later, the chief had managed to wrestle the gun away from the criminal and was the one who had shot it. But the police who were surrounding the vehicle didn't realize this and proceeded to fire rounds of their own into the car. Sadly, the chief was shot and killed during that process. He had placed his own life in danger for the sake of that girl who was now free, and his life was taken. Today, in Mequon, the street on which this man lived--which runs right by the Sem--is named after him, and there is a statue of him and a little girl outside the city's police station.

Perhaps many of you would think about a more recent incident where a teacher in Arkansas pulled down one of her students to shield her while two boys were firing at random towards students outside the school. The teacher was struck by a deadly bullet in the process. She left a husband and young family behind. This woman also put her own life in danger in order to protect the life of another. A similar incident occurred during the shooting that happened recently at a school in Oregon where a student wrestled the gunman to the ground, risking his own life, and was wounded (but not killed) in the process.

Incidents like these are dramatic. They move us to admire those who gave of themselves in such a way. Heroic though these acts were, they nevertheless can't compare to the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross. That sacrifice alone saved us all from eternal death. It moves us to praise him beyond all others, to share the message of that saving act with others, and to make those sacrifices that we do have opportunity to make.

You may not be asked to die in the place of one of your members or one of your students. You may not have to give up one of your kidneys for them. You probably won't have to throw yourself in front of a moving train to save one of them from instant death. Instead, it may be some more of your time that you sacrifice for them. It may be one less hour of sleep. It may be going over to their house to calm down a tense situation instead of watching "Sportscenter" on TV. It may be coming home a couple days early from vacation to conduct the funeral of Tillie Guggenheimer who finally passed away at the age of 102. It may be staying after the game for another half hour to console the 12th man on your basketball team who's feeling down. It may be filling in for another vacancy (look for that one to happen more often!!) It may be bypassing that new van in order to pay for "Johnny's" tuition. It can be all sorts of things! I won't pretend to know or suggest what all the sacrifices are that you should or could make. I'll just point out what one of my Sem profs pointed out in class once when he said, "Never neglect the obvious!" The obvious way to imitate our brother Jesus is to live a life of love, the kind of love that he displayed, which was a love that brought about the wonderful relationship with God that we now enjoy. For all those times when we may feel like we've done enough giving and wouldn't mind a little "taking," the gospel inspires us to give some more. The God who loves us will certainly equip us to do so.

"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." I Co. 11:1

While the English translation found here doesn't use the word "imitate," the original Greek is the same word that is found in Ephesians 5:1(mimeo). Paul's encouragement to imitate him is appropriate. He wasn't being pompous. As an apostle, Paul was taught directly by the Holy Spirit. He was one of those that we would call "a special breed of men." He did miracles. He spoke the very words of God. And yet, Paul was a sinner, as he did so steadfastly proclaim. Therefore not everything about Paul was worth imitating. It is his own effort to imitate Christ that Paul encourages his readers to follow. That part of Paul's life, for sure, was worth imitating.

Knowing as much about the life and ministry of Paul as we do, we could certainly cite many examples of how he imitated his brother Jesus. We think of the many sacrifices Paul made for those he served, even to the point of risking his own life. We think of the many hardships Paul was willing to face in order to further the spread of the gospel. We think of his attitude as he carried out his ministry, which is described in the verses right before the passage quoted above: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved."

Just as Jesus always sought the good of others in the way that he acted and taught, so also Paul made it his purpose to do the same. Perhaps one of the most striking examples is how he returned to the city of Lystra on his first mission journey after being nearly stoned to death by the jealous Jews outside that city not long before. Would you go back and visit a place where you had almost been killed? It's difficult enough to just go back to a place where you once lived, because things may have changed from when you were there. Imagine going back to a place where the people wanted to see you dead! Granted, none of us is like Paul! But don't forget that Paul, too, was a human being with human emotions and a body that hurt when it was struck by stones or fists. Why did he go back there? If he had considered only his own good, then he would have avoided that

area and returned to a different route. He went back there for the good of those that had been introduced to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That was always Paul's "modus operandi," no matter what background the people had with whom he was dealing. In order not to offend anyone and thus hinder their opportunity to hear about Jesus, Paul's intent was to glorify God in whatever he did. Earlier in this section he stated, "Everything is permissible--but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others." We wholeheartedly agree with what Paul says. But how often don't those words break our hearts! How we struggle with this battle between our own personal desires and what we know is in the best interest of the people. "Why should I? we may ask. "I'm entitled," we may exclaim. "I have a right!" we may insist. "Take care of yourself first," we reason. It can get downright depressing to think that you're the only one that makes the all sacrifices!

Philip Spener, one of the pioneers of the pietism movement mentioned earlier, said in his "Pia Desideria," the following: "We would soon have an altogether different church if most of us ministers could unblushingly say to our congregation with Paul, 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.'" Interestingly, among the list of recommended reading that Spener gave to his students was "De Imitatione Christi" by Thomas a' Kempis! At any rate, what do you think about his comment? Is he right?

We who are ministers are examples by virtue of our position. Those lay leaders among us here today could certainly be viewed as examples, too. As such, we hope that we get respect and admiration from our members or our students. We like hearing that many young people point to their pastors or teachers as the inspiration behind their choosing the public ministry for their life's work. Be that as it may, how many of you would feel comfortable in telling your members or your students, "Imitate me"? "Be just like me"? You that are parents, isn't it nice to think that your children will imitate the good qualities they see in you and end up being just like you when it comes to your great intelligence, or your good looks, or your pleasant disposition, or even your great humility? Be that as it may, how many of you parents actually come right out and say to your children, "Be just like me"? Perhaps we are more inclined to tell them, "Do as I say."

As imitators of God, it is our responsibility to point those who look up to us to Jesus. That means we must use the law to point out the need for that Savior. It means using the law to point out what God tells us to do, to be, to avoid, to destroy. It also means using the gospel to reveal how God forgives us for breaking his law and how he promises to bless us with his Spirit and the Spirit's gifts as we continue, the gospel that shows us how Jesus is the perfect example to follow. The example that the Apostle Paul himself gives reminds us to take into account the background of those with whom we are dealing, to seek the good of others first, no matter who they are. God has plans for these souls. Above all, he wants them to be saved. Whenever we start feeling stubborn, or prejudiced, we might stop and ask ourselves: Is this a soul that Jesus would be ashamed to call a "brother"? Does this soul need God's law and gospel any less than I do? Should it matter that this student is the quietest sophomore in class or the one who always questions my answers? the epitome of the "non-jock" or the one who thinks he's such a stud?

the ornery gentleman at the voters' meeting or the one that never comes? the family that just moved in from Thailand, the ex-Mormon, the German-American suburbanite, or any other cultural background you can imagine? All are blood-bought souls, and all are souls that are worth our time and effort as we use the Word with them, and with ourselves! Don't give up imitating Jesus! The simplest and most helpful thing you and I can do is to preach his Word, as Luther said. Preach that word of sin and grace! Preach that word of guidance and strength. And then, practice what you preach! God forgive us when we fail! God bless our efforts as you will!

"You became imitators of us, and of the Lord." (1 Thess. 1:6)

The cycle continues. Paul imitated Christ. Then he invited those with whom he worked to imitate him. And now we hear of a congregation that did so and became a model to others themselves. The Thessalonian Christians had been introduced to Jesus through Paul and his missionary companions. When other congregations saw the Thessalonians in action, they saw a model Christian church. As Paul says later in this context, "And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia--your faith in God has become known everywhere." The Thessalonians were members of a congregation that had experienced severe trial in the days following Paul's visit to them. In fact, the jealous Jews had stirred up such an angry crowd that Paul was forced to flee from that city before his work was done. But after a report he received while in Athens, he learned that the congregation had remained steadfast and had "welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit."

We modern-day Christians must recognize that in imitating Jesus we will face many trials and hardships. Imitating Jesus involves suffering, just as he suffered as our brother here on earth. It comes with the territory! Jesus talked about that when he warned his first disciples about those who would "hate them" and persecute them. He said that those who follow him must "take up their cross." Peter and other New Testament writers devoted large portions of their letters to giving hope and encouragement to those who were suffering for the gospel's sake. And yet, it is that same gospel that provided Jesus' followers of old the hope and the joy they needed to continue in the faith. That's where we followers of today also find our hope and our joy.

Our hardships today are not the same as what the Thessalonians faced. They may not be as severe, either (although that may be a matter of opinion). It might even be true that we create hardships for ourselves from situations that God doesn't intend as hardships. We think of our hardships today as things like work loads, dealing with "difficult" members or students, worrying too much about the results of our labors rather than enjoying the privilege we have to do the work. Whatever the hardships may be, whether they are real or perceived, it's easy to wonder, "Wherein lies the joy?" The answer to that is found where Paul and the Thessalonians found it. The Holy Spirit gives us joy from the gospel. He also gives our "new man" the gifts to use as that new man seeks to be like Jesus. Because the Lord of the Church has cleansed the Church by the washing of water through the Word has presented her to himself as a radiant bride, we rejoice as we imitate him in the church today as we make use of the Word and Sacraments.

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross!" Phil. 2:5-8

When kids imitate Michael Jordan these days, they first of all try to imitate his actions. They do his moves on the basketball court. They drive to the hoop (often uncontrollably) with their mouths open and tongue hanging out to make the big play. They wear shoes like his. Some even shave their heads (which, to me, is better than coloring their hair like one of Mike's teammates). They also try to imitate his attitude, that certain "air" about himself on the court, an attitude of confidence that comes from hard work. But how many kids know what he's really like deep down inside? What's he like in private? with his family and friends at home? What's his attitude towards God and religion? You can't tell those things by watching him on the "NBA on NBC."

To imitate our brother Jesus is to imitate his attitude, too, as Paul reminds us. In my Bible, the heading given for this section from Philippians is "Imitating Christ's Humility." Without ever having witnessed him in private moments, without ever having had a conversation with him or seeing his body language, we know what the attitude of Jesus is. The Word tells us. The passage quoted above is one of the most clear testimonies. Jesus' attitude is one of humble service! He humbly obeyed his Father's will, became human, and took on the nature of a servant. His service led him all the way to the cross, where he served all mankind with his sacrifice and payment for sin. Once again we see that the reason why Jesus is a brother worth imitating is the same thing as the means by which we may imitate him. He was humble--for us. He served--for us. With humble service, then, we imitate our brother Jesus.

Remember how Jesus displayed this attitude of humble service on Maundy Thursday evening? What a marvel to see our brother, soon to experience the bitterest agony possible, kneeling at the feet of his disciples and washing those feet. What a marvel to see the Master performing such a mundane, undesirable task for those who would soon end up forsaking him in fear. What a marvel to see the sinless Lamb of God stooping so low for the sake of some stinking, rotten sinners as those disciples were. And along with that came the words, "I have set an example for you to follow."

Those same men that were gathered in that upper room that evening did indeed follow their brother's example. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they served their fellow man by bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to people everywhere. They faced some really "stinky" situations, to be sure. Some of those situations involved threats to their personal well-being. And yet they continually served, in all humility, as sinful men who had come to know the love of a forgiving God. They imitated their brother by preaching to other sinners the washing away of sins through Jesus' blood.

Fellow servants, let's be humble! It's a precious commodity! Dare I say, a "rare" commodity?? In society, perhaps it is a rare commodity. How about in the church? among us called workers? Without humility, can there be genuine service? Without humility is there a genuine willingness to serve even in situations about which we might say, "This really stinks"? Do we who are in the limelight and perhaps are even imitated by others have an "air" of humility about us? Or is our head so far "up in the air" that we forget or refuse to stoop down and "wash the feet" of those we are called to serve? Are we humble enough to receive correction from a colleague? to regularly examine our faithfulness as ministers of the gospel, rather than saying "I'm being faithful" as an excuse to be lazy or stubborn? to make healthy changes even though we don't normally like to change? to admit when we are wrong or don't know all the answers? to make the first step in healing a relationship that isn't going so well? to say to ourselves, "I am going to be good and gentle today, more like Jesus"? Are we men so concerned about being "the man" that we set our own agenda for achieving that identity, rather than imitating what Jesus, the God-Man, displayed?

If we are honest, we must confess that we fall far short of being like Jesus. That honesty about what we are like as compared to what he is like will then lead us to be humble. Humility before our almighty God, in turn, is what leads us to give honor to him. Thus, humility becomes a strength, an attribute for which to pray. If our brother, Jesus, displayed humility throughout his life and in his death, how can we do anything besides?

I once had a discussion with a pastor about the role of synod officials in our church. He asked me, "Are they leaders or servants?" I said, "servants." I was emphasizing the original meaning of the word "minister." He said, "leaders." He was emphasizing the fact that their way to serve was by leading the church in their respective fields. I suppose we were both right. I suppose there is more than one way to view the role of anyone who works in the church. Jesus himself was a "leader" and a "servant." He said to his disciples in that upper room, "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am." Those are titles of leadership. He then continued,

"Now that I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet." That's service. And that's just one example.

We are called "Pastor...Teacher...Professor...Elder...President...Reverend...," and rightly so, for that is what we are. There's no doubt that we are leaders. But we are those things only because the God of all grace has called us sinful men to those positions through the voice of other sinful men. We are called to serve, in all humility, no matter where it is that God has called us, no matter who those other sinful men are among whom we serve. That's the attitude that God requires of us when he says through Paul: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus."

Perhaps that's an important reminder for us as we now deal with the current shortage of called workers in our synod. Is this perhaps a way by which God is calling us to be humble? Is this an opportunity for us all to think again about the privilege that he gives the church to carry out the ministry of the gospel? to be thankful for those who do serve now? to encourage more to consider this work not so much because they are gifted to do so, but because, above all else, they are forgiven sinners who have the opportunity to train for the work of sharing that good news with others full time? That's why all of us here today are doing this work, correct?

Let's consider one last set of thoughts from Scripture: "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20-21).*" What beautiful words they are, and how they inspire us to imitate Jesus with all our life! Yes, Christ "in us" does matter. The new man in us, the part of us that does what is pleasing to God, is what Paul points out with the words, "Christ lives in me." But the fact that Christ lives in us is only the result of the fact that he gave himself for us. If he had not done that, and if the Holy Spirit had not brought us to faith in that saving work, then the only thing "in us" would be that sinful man who is an enemy of the Savior. How clearly does the gospel declare why Jesus is a brother worth imitating, what it means to imitate our brother, and how we receive the power to even try!

"I long to be like Jesus: Meek, loving, lowly, mild; I long to be like Jesus, the Father's only child." Who among us wouldn't want to be like him? Who is more worth imitating than our brother Jesus? While writing an essay on the subject is one really good way to become more conscious of this endeavor, most of us don't get that blessed opportunity. C.S. Lewis offers this suggestion to consider in his book called "Mere Christianity." He says, "What is the point of pretending to be what you are not? There is a good kind (of pretending) where the pretence leads up to the real thing (p.147)." In other words, the actual act of imitating Jesus can lead us to be more like him. Consciously trying to be like Jesus, having that attitude in the front of our minds, will help us to be more like him. Lewis cites children's games as an example and how their pretending actually equips them to become the adults they imitate. Playing "dress-up" helps a child become the real thing later on.

There is a parallel to what Lewis says and to our lives as Christians. We are told to "put on Christ," to "wear" him everyday. "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ," Paul says. "Put on the new man." All such phrases could be used as substitutes for the admonition to imitate Jesus! No matter how it's stated, no matter how we put it into practice, and no matter that we will never end up being "the real thing," we know that imitating Jesus is not a matter of "pretend" to us. It's the way we want to live our lives. It's our prayer at bedtime. It's our response to the gospel, the good news that reminds us each and every day that one day we will indeed "*be like him...for we shall see him as he is.*"