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Philippians 3:17-4:1

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What a fascinating story is the story of the Apostle Paul, who was at first a persecutor of Christians. Then he was converted to be believer by the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus on the way there to arrest Christians. We have read the story of his missionary journeys preaching about Jesus to non-Jews until he was finally arrested by the Romans in Jerusalem because his preaching caused a disturbance among the Jews.

Paul was a Roman citizen and claimed the right to be taken to Rome to be tried. On the way to Rome Paul was kept under house arrest in the city of Caesarea by the Sea. This city was the headquarters of the Roman governor in Judea.

Caesarea as a colony of Rome totally took on the nature of Roman culture. There were Roman race tracks, Roman baths, a Roman Coliseum where Romans partied while Christians and Jews were torn apart by wild beasts to the delight of Roman officials.

One of my friends visited the archeological site of Caesarea where he said the guides always pointed out the prominent vomitorem where Romans would go after eating and drinking to throw up and resume the partying. So decadent had the city and the culture become.

It was here in Caesarea that Paul was held under Roman house arrest for two years awaiting his destiny. He did not know if he would be killed there or shipped on to Rome to stand trial.

We can imagine Paul in his room during a day of Roman debauchery at the Coliseum, seeing his armed Roman guard at the door to his room, hearing the crowds cheering and screaming as martyrs were torn apart by wild animals. We can picture him sitting at his table writing this letter to the Philippians, members of the small church he had founded in Philippi. He had the opportunity to send the letter to them by way of a friend who would carry it by hand back to Philippi.

Some of the letters we have, written by Paul, are angry because the church to which he writes is misbehaving. Some of the letters Paul writes are intellectual to instruct the people in the meaning of the faith. This letter is very emotional, tenderly imploring the church Paul loved the most to stay true to what he had taught them.

At the beginning of the letter Paul seems to be anticipating his death. He wrote that he didn't know whether he was soon going to die or continue to live. He wrote that at this point he doesn't really know which he prefers because on the one hand he is fatigued, worn out by his

work and ready to find rest with Jesus. On the other hand he wishes to be back with the Philippians to encourage them in these difficult times.

You can hear the anguish in the letter. In today's portion he seems to have accepted that he will not see the Philippians again because his emphasis is on important instruction to leave them with. The main instruction in today's portion of the letter might sound a little strange to us. He says, "Brothers and Sisters, join together in imitating me." To our modern ears someone telling us to imitate him might seem pretty arrogant. Still, on the other hand, in Paul's day and in the centuries before and centuries afterwards, the main method of learning was imitation. Craftsmen took on young men as apprentices who lived with them under harsh conditions for years, standing side by side the apprentice imitated the master craftsman until he could do so perfectly and strike out on his own.

Teachers and philosophers also took on apprentices called disciples who went with them and listened to them and imitated their behavior until they mastered it and went out on their own. Think of Jesus with his twelve apprentices or disciples and how there came a time when he sent them out two by two to practice what they had learned by imitating him.

It may be one of the losses of modern education that we go to classes and take tests and then graduate and go out with a diploma telling the world we are qualified without having worked side by side with someone, imitating them. Maybe the medical field is one of the few places where this takes place to some degree.

So Paul's command to imitate him would probably not sound arrogant to the Philippians accustomed in their day to the idea that they have learned how to be Christians by standing side by side with the master.

The fear Paul has is certainly that the Philippians, no more standing side by side with him might not yet have mastered the craft of their faith. They might not have had time enough with him their master, time enough to have the skill of faith become second nature to them.

They may not net be sure enough of the Christian way so that they could fall prey to the imitation of the vulgar Roman culture, begin to imitate the surrounding culture of Rome which would mean the destruction of all Paul had taught them.

I picture Paul hearing the gluttonous and inebriated crowd, cheering as people die before them, ripped apart by animals while the crowd itself acts worse than animals, gorging themselves until they are sick, throwing up so they can start over. Paul writes, "Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, they glory in the shameful way they live. They brag the next day about how much they ate and drank and the particularly gory nature of some deaths that took place before them. Such behavior will inevitably be their undoing. Don't imitate them. Imitate me.

This powerful letter from long ago might cause us to think, "Thank God we do not live in such gory and decadent times, thank God we do not live within such a culture." But don't we also at times find ourselves tempted to give in to ways that are not true to the imitation of our master Jesus? Can we first put ourselves in the company of those the imitation of whom would make us better?

And maybe a more important question: can we be people worthy of imitation? We have around us young people and children in our congregation who stand by us each day learning intuitively to imitate us. They are apprentices of us and our craft of living. It is scary how they learn from us.

I remember some years ago I was walking across the campus of Columbia Seminary and someone shouted to me "Hey, Todd!" It turned out to be someone I had not seen for twenty years and he said he had come out the door and seen me walking to my car. I was sixty yards away and he had not seen my face but said, "I saw how you walked and it was just like you daddy walked. It had to be you."

It raises a fearful question. What about us do our children do learn by imitation? Not just our physical movements but our spirit, our attitude our character? Most of them are our apprentices for eighteen years. Are we bold enough to have them as our apprentices. What do they learn standing side by side with us?

Are you living a life that would allow you to say, "Be imitators of me."?