

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 21
Year A

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Psalm 25:1-9
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

I have asked the question before, “If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” We are called to be imitators of Christ, but what does that mean? None of us has the power to do the wonderful deeds Jesus did during His ministry. None of us are without sin, as He was. How can we be imitators of Christ, to be Christ-like?

I have an older brother who has been very successful in life. Although almost two years older than me, Paul was only a year ahead of me in school. He was very diligent in his studies. He worked hard as an athlete, running in cross country and distance events in track. After high school, Paul went to the Coast Guard Academy, where he lettered in cross country, indoor track and outdoor track every year. He even went to the NCAA championships in the half-mile his senior year. After graduation and a tour in Vietnam, he went to MIT at the government’s expense in engineering. I could go on with all he has done, but I think you get the point – he is someone I have tried to imitate all my life. Needless to say, I have not done well at that – sort of like as we are in trying to imitate Jesus.

The Apostle Paul explores the questions of imitating Jesus in his letter to the Philippians. Unlike my striving to be like my brother, God does not expect us to be like Jesus in the actions He did. I was never dedicated enough to do well in track or academics like my brother. God does not expect us to excel in healing people or raising anyone from the dead. However, God does expect us to imitate the attitude of Christ.

Paul calls upon the people of Philippi to be of one mind, have the same love, as Christ. To do that would make Paul’s heart happy. He tells the church, and us, that to be successful in these things, we must not look after our own interests, but the interests of others. Then, he goes into a wonderful hymn about the Jesus we are to emulate. This gets at the heart of Paul’s message.

This hymn has been given the descriptor “kenotic.” What does that mean? It comes from the Greek word, *kenoo* or *kenosis*, which means emptying out. The first three verses of this hymn describe that process – how Jesus went from His role in creation to dying on the cross. Many commentators have contrasted this with Adam’s striving to be like God. Remember the incident with the fruit in the garden. Jesus gave up what He had to become like us. But Jesus did not give up being like God because, in His life and ministry, Jesus emulated the greatest attribute of God – love. In becoming human, Jesus could embrace this Godly passion of joy, love, sensitivity to vulnerability and need. He became like us so that we could become like Him through our ministries of visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, speaking the truth to power even unto to death.

This passion which Jesus embraced empties itself of self. That cannot be done by focusing on oneself. It can only happen when we give of ourselves to those to whom God has called us to minister.

The second half of this hymn shifts the focus from Jesus' self-emptying to the actions of God. God exalted Jesus. God gave Him the name that is above every name. God causes every knee to bow before Jesus. Paul concludes this passage by reminding us that it is God who is at work in each of us. Just as God did these things for Jesus, so God does these things for us. It is God who gives us the will and the ability to work in a manner which pleases God.

It is God who, working through us, allows us to be imitators of Jesus to the point that yes, there is enough evidence to convict us when we are put on trial for being Christians.