

Who Do You Follow?
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Matthew 4:12-23 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Pastor Alison Thatcher

It is quite common for there to be a dramatic internal reaction – whether it be dismay, delight, or just incredulity – when a person realizes, “Oh my goodness. I’m becoming my mother,” or “I’m becoming my father.” Even if your parent is the best and you have a great relationship, it will almost inevitably happen and it will almost inevitably be a shock. If your mom is a local professional, you can’t go anywhere in town without someone saying, “You look just like her! You have the same mannerisms as her!” You might respond, “What a compliment that I look like her.” You might respond, “Really? *All* the same mannerisms?” (Totally hypothetical example.) Everywhere we go we bring learned-from-birth tendencies that are often invisible to us. To every relationship we carry years of ingrained assumptions and reactions that we aren’t usually aware of. I’ve found that I cope with discomfort by employing humor, just like my dad. And I don’t always do it well, just like my dad. I am often compelled to be a peacemaker because that is what my mom modeled and that is what her mom modeled. I wonder if your parents’ tendencies and reactions show up in you in surprising ways when you interact with others in various situations. It may be for better or for worse, probably for a bit of both.

But I think the reason that the “I’m becoming my parent” realization is often cast as being negative, is because somewhere inside us we remember when we learned that our parents, guardians, or idoled adults aren’t perfect. They aren’t infallible. They aren’t God. It’s an obvious, necessary moment of growth, but it can be a painful one. It leaves an empty space where a seemingly reliable compass used to be. So, we find other mentors, idols, and inspirational leaders throughout our lives, whether consciously or unconsciously. All the while we continue to carry our inherited tendencies and we risk the same disillusionment with our new mortal heroes that we experienced with our parents. We are all wounded, imperfect people, trying to work together, trying to find our way in this world.

So are the fishermen when Jesus calls them. Jesus has been out there calling the people to repent, reorient, change direction. As soon as they are called, Peter and Andrew leave their nets, presumably right where they had just cast them in the lake. I wonder what else they leave behind besides nets and a boat. What traditions that no longer serve them, what toxic habits that stand in the way of harmony, what insecurities, assumptions, and prejudices. James and John decide to follow Jesus as their model, rather than their own father Zebedee. I wonder if they see in Jesus a leader who will love them unconditionally, who will not favor one over the other, who will selflessly lead them toward justice and reconciliation. And while we ask ourselves “what would Jesus do?” in our daily lives, we might ask ourselves “what would we do?” in Jesus’ time. What would we leave behind? Who would we follow? Aren’t we still being lovingly challenged and called in every moment? What do

we need to leave behind in order to answer? How do we need to change direction in order to follow?

We get a glimpse of how even the early church struggled with this in Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. "There are quarrels among you," writes Paul. I imagine the Corinthians responding, "No kidding. Ya think?" We are not at our best, our most level-headed, our most receptive when we are caught in the maelstrom of quarrels. I, for one, am relieved to know that even an early church planted by Paul himself has the same problems that we do whenever we try to work together. How often lately have we heard, and maybe said, "We have never been this polarized"? Maybe that's true in our lifetimes, maybe not. But it definitely isn't true in the course of human history, and it isn't even true within the church. A gathering of people striving to follow Jesus in a world of corruption and deceit. We've been struggling since the very beginning.

And the main cause of discord at that time in the Corinthian church, is that there have been multiple leaders, presumably at odds with one another, and the members have aligned themselves, some with Paul, some with Apollos, some with Cephas. Their wounds have been activated and they are grasping for the security of a reliable leader. One that assures them that they are right, one that promises a sense of belonging. It is so hard when our communities are conflicted and fractured. When we feel pain in places where we once felt comfort. When we are forced to question certainties that we used to take for granted. It hurts. And we all react to that hurt in different ways. Some of us try to patch everything up, make it look the way it used to on the surface, afraid to acknowledge the brokenness underneath. Some of us draw a line in the sand, fearing that coming to the table might weaken our resolve. Some of us may opt out of participating at all because the discord is too much to bear. I have to imagine that one or more of these reactions resonate with each of us as we examine conflict in our own families, in our country, even in our church, just like the church in Corinth. We are all wounded, imperfect people, trying to work together, trying to find our way in this world.

We have that in common with the disciples too. Yes, they answered Jesus' call to follow him but, time after time, they missed the point that Jesus was trying to teach them. They vied for power among themselves. They even abandoned Jesus at his death. By worldly logic we might say they abandoned Jesus when it mattered most; they abandoned Jesus in the end; they had one more chance to set things right and they blew it. By worldly logic, the cross is an excruciating end. It's a win for empire, which thrives by setting the people against each other using tactics of manipulation and intimidation. To think otherwise is foolishness. But, by the logic of the cross, Christians know that it is not the end. That that which is broken can be remade even stronger than it was before. That that which is killed can be brought back to brand new life. That pain and death do not have the last say. Love has the last say.

For those of us who come from families or communities that did not love well, or who just forget, Paul describes what the kind of life-giving love that we are meant to practice looks like. And while this description is often read at weddings today, it was not meant for a marriage union. It was written to the quarreling church of Corinth. They needed a reminder

of what the love they were meant to show each other was supposed to look like. “Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable. It keeps no record of wrongs. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.” That is what the love we are supposed to show each other looks like. Paul goes on to say what a love like that can do: “It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

That is what we are meant to follow. No human idol can live up to that. Only Jesus. Of course, even a broken clock is right twice a day and even a wounded person gets love right, probably more than twice a day. When we see love shown to us or between our neighbors, let us celebrate it. When it is not shown, let us have the courage to gently call our neighbors back into love, and let us have the humility to be called back into love ourselves. And as we examine who we are following and who we are meant to be following, let us look back and see who is following us. How closely are we modeling Jesus’ love in the eyes of our children? For my part, I hope Maris inherits the humor that comes down my paternal line, but I hope they are even better at facing discomfort with vulnerability and sincerity. After all, even Jesus wept. I hope they can support unity in the midst of conflict like my maternal line, but I also hope they are not afraid to displease people when difficult truths need to be voiced. Even Jesus brought division to a world that would otherwise give into empire’s false, coercive peace. Someday when they say, “I’m becoming my mother!” I hope it’s in the ways I strived to model after Jesus. I hope Maris can leave behind those things I have unintentionally taught them that get in the way of them following Jesus. We are all wounded, imperfect people, trying to work together, trying to find our way in this world. As we do so, may we leave behind our tendencies to be envious, boastful, arrogant or rude. May we nurture our tendencies to be patient and kind, to rejoice in the truth. May we resist falling in line with mortal leaders, no matter how exemplary they often are. May we always strive to follow Jesus. May we always strive to follow love.