

Who Do You Look Like?
Philippians 3: 17 – 4:1
Don Lincoln

I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. Not exactly the seafood capital of the world. I recall crab cakes from the high school cafeteria – patties of what seemed like differently seasoned thanksgiving stuffing, with tiny fragmented white threads of something I was told was crab meat. What did I know?

But in 1990 I moved to Annapolis, MD. I discovered what I had been missing all my life – a REAL crab cake. A Maryland, jumbo lump blue-crab, crab cake. Like the photo. Boy had I missed it when I was in school!



Shortly after moving to Annapolis, I also had my first ever experience with a crab feast. Which is one of the most surreal culinary experiences you can ever have, if you didn't grow up eating steamed crab. I love the typical reaction of folks when you take them for their first time to a crab feast and they've NEVER seen anything like it.

So, you can imagine my great curiosity when at some point while living in Annapolis, Maryland, I first saw "imitation crab" in the grocery store. I suspect it's made to look like king crab legs – because that's easier to imitate than blue crab. And I noticed right away imitation crab was MUCH less expensive than real crab.



I tasted it and realized not only was it much less expensive, it wasn't quite the same. And that's because it's made of a less nutritious minced fish paste, with fillers of starch, egg whites, sugar, salt and additives to **mimic the flavor, color and texture of real crab meat**. Yeah. Flavor, color, texture, right? I don't think so.

Imitation. Go through your pantry and imagine how many "imitations" you have seen. Imitation vanilla flavoring. Or other products – like imitation leather - pleather. What are the words that come to mind when we say imitation? Fake. Pretend. Fake Gucci bag on the street for \$19.95. Imitation diamonds. Better not show up with those in the

engagement ring. You and I know what reaction we get when we think of the word “imitation.” Imitation crab meat in Maryland??? Really?

But that’s NOT the reaction the Apostle Paul is looking for when he writes to his friends, “Brothers and sisters, join in **imitating** me.” Imitate me. Paul’s not looking for fake or pretend. He’s suggesting, rather, the old adage, “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.”

Now, at first read this might sound like a narcissistic power play. Indeed, listen to the reactions of three different scholars in their commentaries on this text:

William Barclay writes: There are few preachers who would dare to make such an appeal – imitate me. Most preachers begin with the serious handicap that they have to say, “Do as I say,” not, “Do as I do!”¹

Tom Wright – the professor in our Journey class – responds this way: “I find this both exciting and scary as myself a pastor and a teacher. Because I would not usually say to any congregations that I have ministered in “Watch what I do and copy me,” because I might be afraid they would actually do that too well and then we’d all be in a mess!”²

Fred Craddock in his commentary writes: “The phrase ‘join in imitating me’ creates discomfort in us not only because of its egotistical ring, but also because of the artificiality we associate with imitation.” Fake crab.

But Craddock goes on: “Some of that discomfort may be dispelled by the realization that imitation of the teacher or master was a pedagogical principle held in high regard and widely practiced in the day. Philosophers, masters of academies, and religious leaders espoused and practiced the principle.”³

Indeed, this is not self-aggrandizement on Paul’s part, or the suggestion that he’s the model of perfection in all things. It is, rather, the very practical form of mentoring. Just as in an earlier letter, Paul encourages the Corinthian believers. He writes to them, “become imitators of me as I am an imitator of Jesus Christ.” In other words, “**be fellow imitators of me in imitating Jesus!**” I like that. Be fellow imitators of me in imitating Jesus!

What’s critical to understand is the context, which is made clear by Tom Wright. In his lesson today, he reminds us, “When the Apostle Paul arrived in a new town, to plant a new church, announcing the lordship of Jesus Christ to the community, Paul knew they had never before seen anyone living the way he believed the Messiah called him to live. He knew that it was up to him to model this new way of life and they would be watching.

And the apostle knew what we all know. We all learn much more by watching than by hearing. And if there is a mismatch between what we hear and what we see, we tend to go with what we see.

Again: imitation is one of the greatest pedagogical principles – we know it, for good or ill. We watch our young people pick up the saunter and swagger they have seen in

an older idol – we listen to them pick up the language they hear them say; they sing the way they sing; they start to act like them and begin to experiment in life like those idols do – the actions they take, the things they experiment with.

Any of us who are parents know it. What we do, how we talk, how we act, how we live – all are key initial, teaching influences upon our children. Many a parent realizes this far too late when they hear their three year old start to cuss.

Golf pros know imitation sells – how many millions of dollars have been spent on slow motion videos of top golf pros swinging a driver, so you can watch and try to imitate them?

So what was it that Paul was modeling? What did he want the Philippians to imitate? Let me give you a clue. Later in the text, Paul writes: **“Our citizenship is in heaven.”**

In this morning’s email devotional to the church I noted that far too often people have misinterpreted this text to mean you and I should not worry about or even think about our earthly lives, because heaven is where we truly belong. There’s an old song, “This world is not my home, I’m....” It made me think of someone I knew in a bible study in college who was just so spiritually minded. All she was focused on was such a spiritual life and getting to heaven, that we said she was “too heavenly minded for any earthly good!”

Paul is using this term or phrase, “citizens of heaven” because he knows his audience. The Philippians live in Philippi – a Greek city – but Philippi is a Roman colony, filled with Roman soldiers and their descendants after being conquered. Though it’s a long way from Rome, because it’s a Roman colony, the dress is Roman, the culture is Roman, the language is the Latin of Rome.⁴

The Philippians understand exactly what Paul is getting at. Paul is telling them they are to be the “culture of heaven” at work in the world. “The church is a **colony of heaven** in the world, with responsibility for bringing the life and rule of heaven to bear on earth.” As we say every Sunday, **“On earth as it is in heaven.”**

And Paul shows them what that means. He practices it, he writes it, he preaches it. Imitate me as citizens of heaven, right where you are, in Philippi. Citizens of a kingdom where women are equal and hold leadership positions; citizens of a kingdom where masters and slaves break bread together; citizens of a kingdom where Samaritans are friends and strangers are welcomed. A kingdom marked by generosity instead of greed; love instead of hatred; service to neighbor instead of winner takes all. Imitate me in the **Jesus-Way**.

You see, that’s when this text, as they say, “...quits preachin’ and goes to meddlin’.” Because it asks each of us, “Who are you and I imitating in our way of living, speaking, acting and being? Who is reflected in our persona? Who do we look like?” I often had people tell me I reminded them of my father. I always hoped it was not just his looks, or the timbre of his voice – but that they also saw in me – at least some of the time – the

honesty, faithfulness, selflessness and integrity that he modeled for me and so many others all his life.

Perhaps an even more important question for you and for me: “Who is watching us – you and me – to see what the **Jesus-way** looks like in the world?”

I started out with imitation crab meat and fake Gucci bags. That’s the worst thing the world can see – fake Christians. Pretend believers, who only show up with a word about Jesus when they’re in church, but the rest of their life models only greed, self-centeredness, hatred, mean-spiritedness, prejudice.

When the church has been at its best, it’s been seen in the thousands and tens of thousands of believers, who may never make the headlines, but who are doing the Jesus thing of making the world around them a place where love and generosity and healing and hope and kindness and mercy come to birth each day.⁵

So I ask you friends, Who are you imitating? And....who is watching you to see the ways of heaven?

AMEN

1. William Barclay, *Philippians*, The Daily Study Bible Series.
2. NT Wright – Paul and His Letter to the Philippians; Small Group Edition; www.udemy.com; section 4.
3. Fred Craddock, Interpretation Commentary on Philippians.
4. Barclay, op. cit.
5. NT Wright, Paul for Everyone, Commentary on Philippians.