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A Letter from Paul – Philippians
X. Mentors, Models, and Guides
Philippians 3:17 – 4:1

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Years ago, the Presbyterian minister, Fred Rogers – better known to the world as Mister Rogers – was invited to address the noon meeting of the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The National Press Club is as unsentimental, cynical, and tough a crowd as one can find in our nation’s capital. In fact, before the lunch, some members of the club – used to hearing from politicians, power brokers, and other such important persons – were overheard joking that with Mister Rogers in their neighborhood that day, they were probably in for a rather “light lunch”.

Mister Rogers was introduced, came to the podium. And the first thing he did before he said a word was take out his pocket watch, with much the same ease with which he would begin his show by donning his sneakers and cardigan. He then announced to that hard-shell gathering of reporters that he wanted to observe two minutes of silence before he began his speech; and that he wished to invite everyone in the room to use those two minutes of silence to remember the people in their lives who had helped make it possible for them to have accomplished so much in their own lives. The room grew silent. And before even one minute had passed, one could hear sniffing and see teary eyes all around that room, as one after another these tough reporters were moved by the memory of those who had been their mentors, models, guides, parents, and teachers.¹

I could suggest we take two minutes to do the same right now – I even have a pocket watch. But the older I get, the easier the tears begin to flow, and I’m not sure I could get on with the sermon once we had started down that path. So, let’s don’t do that. But we do all have such persons in our lives, don’t we? People whose love for us, whose interest in us, whose own gifts and abilities inspired us in the development of our own. Mentors from whom we drew wisdom and inspiration, models we sought to learn from and emulate, people whose lives intersected with and touched our own in ways that made us more than we ever would have been without them, who made us better than we ever would have become on our own. Let us give thanks to God for those people in our lives.

For, the truth is, we all need mentors and models and guides in order to live this life well. And that is especially true when it comes to the living out of our Christian life. *“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us,”* writes Paul. I used to think Paul was bragging when he wrote things like that – which he does several times in his letters. But I now know that I was completely misreading Paul in thinking that way. In the first place, because I had a seminary professor teach me that back when Paul was writing his letters, there was New Testament, no four Gospels, for new converts to Christ to read

– they hadn't been written yet. Which means that the only way new Christians could learn what Jesus taught was by listening to apostles like Paul.

And the only way new Christians could learn what a Christian looked like – how a Christian lived and thought and ate and drank and worked and worshipped and walked – was by watching the apostles, as well as the few more experienced and mature Christians in their midst. I remember my professor saying it this way: that Paul was the only “Gospel” most of those early Christians would ever come to know. So, when Paul says, *“Join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us,”* he is not bragging. Paul is simply doing his Christ-given duty of calling people to Christ and to the way of Christ. Helping them to comprehend what exactly is the Way and the Truth and the Life² which has opened up for us through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But I also think the second reason – the one we started with – is also behind Paul's statement about imitating him. Namely, the fact that we need mentors and models and guides not just to show us the Christian life, but also to inspire us, support us, and to encourage us as we actually seek to live that Christian life. It takes a village to raise a child, the saying goes – and the simple truth is that it takes a whole church to raise up a Christian. A whole church of mentors, models, and guides in the ways of Christian discipleship.

Eugene Peterson, the late Presbyterian pastor, and author of so many wonderful books on the Christian life, tells of growing up in Montana without a father. And he tells of a businessman in his church there named Chet Ellingson, who took an interest in him during those difficult years of early adolescence – became for him a father-figure. For example, Ellingson would regularly take him duck-hunting or fishing – nothing elaborate, just spending time together. But it was a gift of time and mentoring that had a powerful impact on Peterson's Christian development:

*Chet treated me like an adult before I was an adult. He accepted me into a world of responsibility and respect before I had given any evidence that I belonged there. The “Christian thing,” his phrase, was implicit in our conversations but never seemed to be the explicit subject. Jesus and Spirit and Scripture were expressed in the shivering cold offhandedly . . . The faith was simply there, spoken and acted out in the midst of whatever else we were doing . . . What he did was become a bridge on which I traveled from immaturity to maturity, on my way to becoming . . . “fully alive [in] Christ” . . . He connected me with an adulthood that was virtually synonymous with “Christian.”*³

So, who have been those Christian mentors, models, and guides in your life? Who brought you closer to Christ, showed you how to think and live like a Christian, and encouraged you in the living of that life? I think of the two choir directors in my home church during my childhood and adolescence. “Sir” Hewitt – “Sir”, I later learned, was not actually his first name; but we elementary school boys' choir members never called him anything but “Sir”. And then, during my junior high and senior high choir years, Ty Riddle, who couldn't have been more different from Sir if he had tried. Sir wore a bow tie and always was in a suit. Ty wore sandals and tie-

dyed shirts, and he had a goatee. And yet, both of those devoted Christian men taught me and inspired me in the joy of worship and in the glory of music raised with devotion before the throne of Christ.

I think of my fourth-grade Sunday School teacher, Mr. Ransom – the first male Sunday School teacher I ever had. His obvious devotion to Christ was a powerful witness – especially to us boys in the class. So, who were your choir directors and Sunday School teachers and youth advisors? I can't wait for Sunday School to start back up for our children and youth for just this reason. In fact, I recently came across a testimony to the contributions of Sunday School teachers which I think bears repeating as we get ready for Rally Day. The author writes:

They stood up there in front of often distracted children and talked about God. They dragged their weekday-weary bodies, their sometimes halting knowledge of the Bible, their own struggles with doubt, and their clearly evident humanity into spare Sunday school classrooms and dared to talk to other people's children as best they could about the Christian faith.

I look back now and realize how much what they did mattered, how much what they said continues to nourish what I believe and what I do with my life . . . Some might sniff at their primitive pedagogy – their crinkled lesson books, their almost comical attempts to make cutout paper sheep stick to flannel boards, and their often futile struggles to instruct restless nine-year-olds – and call it a waste of time. I don't. I call it courage. I call it love. I call it faithful testimony.⁴

Mentors, models, and guides. “Brothers, join in imitating me,” writes Paul, “and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” Paul is not bragging. He is simply stating a truth: that we need mentors, models, and guides in order to grow up into mature Christians. And he is reminding us, indirectly, to be thankful for those who have been our mentors, models, and guides – those who, like Paul, have been to us living embodiments, even if flawed, of the Gospel to us. We need such folks in our lives whether we are eight or eighty. Thank God for those who have been the “Gospel” to us.

But Paul has one other thing to say in our passage – well, a couple of other things, like be careful whom you choose to emulate, because there are some bad mentors, models, and guides out there, even in the church. Like those who are actually living, despite Sunday morning outward appearances, as “*enemies of the cross of Christ.*” By which he means those who live like Christians on Sunday and like the world around us on Monday.

But it's the next thing which Paul has to say which really catches my interest:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

“*Our citizenship is in heaven*” – clearly this is meant as a contrast to those whom he just described, those whose “*god is their belly*” and who “*glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.*” Our citizenship is in heaven – meaning we take our cues from those who are worshipping Christ and not their own self-indulgence in worldly ways. And it is a reminder that the church of Jesus Christ on earth is always meant to be a contrast society in relation to the world around it and to the ways of that world. We are to be different from the world around us, shaped by the values of heaven and not by what succeeds in the marketplace of worldly success. It is a reminder, also, that as we do this, we may very well become the only “Gospel” many of our acquaintances will ever see.

But even beyond that reminder of our heavenly citizenship, I am drawn to that part about Christ transforming “*our lowly body to be like his glorious body.*” I could preach at least three different sermons on that verse alone, but in light of what Paul has been saying up above, here’s what I think we are to hear in that verse this morning: that it is not just important that we have mentors, models, and guides in order for us to grow up into full maturity in the Christian life – it is also equally important what we allow Christ to work in us, to “*transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body*”, in order that we should, in our turn, prove to be worthy mentors, models, and guides to those who come after us in the church. It’s not just important that we have mentors, models, and guides in our lives as Christians – it is equally important that we allow Christ to transform us into His likeness, that we might faithfully serve as mentors, models, and guides in the lives of other Christians, and especially in the lives of the children and youth in this congregation. As my teacher, Dr. John Leith, often said: the church lives from generation to generation.

From generation to generation. I came across an article written by a Presbyterian pastor some years ago about attending a family reunion in Tennessee, in which what he says about his family speaks just as truly about what it means to be part of the Christian family. At the reunion, some of the old family movies were brought out and enjoyed:

The most moving scene in the movie collection was Christmas 1936. My father was a 2-year-old playing on the floor with his mother . . . My dad remembered the Popeye doll he was playing with in the scene.

Then suddenly my father and grandfather were on the screen. Dad was 2, and his dad held him in his lap – naturally, reading to him.

When I saw that young man with a strong body hugging his son in his lap I thought of sitting in the same man’s lap when he was old and frail, and I thought of my sons sitting on my lap listening to me read to them. I cried; everyone cried . . .

In the movie of my father and grandfather I saw part of the chain of my own life. My grandfather taught Dad how to love a son

and raise him as a Christian. I pray that I am teaching my boys those lessons handed down along the chain.⁵

A chain of kindness and love and Christian devotion, passed down from generation to generation within that family. But, again, what he writes of his family, I could write about this church. How wonderfully seriously you take this responsibility of being mentors, models, and guides to our children and youth. Every child in this congregation grows up with a hundred or so parents and grandparents, each of whom will love them, sometimes tough love them, and in a hundred and one ways show them Christ. It is something I see every Sunday morning, every Wonderful Wednesday. It was there at Vacation Bible School, and I can't wait to see it again when Rally Day comes around and for the first time in a long while our regular gatherings resume.

We are blessed by the mentors, models, and guides in our lives. But we are blessed in order to be a blessing – to become mentors, models, and guides to those who come after us. Even to become those who are the only “Gospel” many people outside the church will ever see. And all of this is from Christ, who is, even now, transforming our lowly bodies to be worthy of this work – transforming our lowly bodies to be more and more like His glorious body, as He works in this world to bring all things round to Himself.

¹ Thomas G. Long, Testimony (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 110.

² John 14:6.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, Leap Over A Wall (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 22-23.

⁴ Long, p. 112.

⁵ Source unknown.