

"Making Christ Our HIGHEST Example"

Titus 2:1-8

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church  
June 4, 2023

I remember it as though it was yesterday: Thirty years ago next month, the Summer Olympic games were about to get underway in Barcelona, Spain. That's because at the time, I was pastoring a church in Irvington, NJ and we were all excited about one athlete in particular—a young man who was from Maplewood, only a few blocks over. His name was Ron Karnaugh and he was considered a heavy favorite as he was the world's highest ranked swimmer in the 200 individual medley, an event that challenges the swimmer's skills in all 4 swimming strokes—freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke, and butterfly. But tragedy struck during the Opening Ceremony when his father, Peter Karnaugh, while climbing the steps of the stadium to get a better photograph of his son, collapsed from a massive heart attack and died. Of course, Ron Karnaugh knew nothing of this until later that night when the Executive Director of the United States Olympic Committee, Harvey Schiller, and another board member, New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, came to his room in the Olympic Village to tell him.

I can't imagine a more tragic contrast than the pride and joy of representing your country in the Olympic Games--the culmination of a lifelong dream--and then having your father and best friend die before you even have had a chance to compete; it all seemed like a cruel joke. Yet, despite the weight of his personal grief, Ron Karnaugh WOULD compete and attempt to win that Gold Medal in honor of his father. On the day of the race, that desire propelled him in front of the pack for the first 50 meters. But then the stress of the week finally caught up with him and he finished in sixth place.

Thirty minutes following his Olympic race, Ron addressed the media wearing a large straw hat that had belonged to his father. He said, "This was the hat he was wearing during the opening ceremony. It was kind of a neat feeling when I saw him wearing it. It reminded me of my childhood, particularly at the age of 8. He had worn it when he would watch me swim. He'd wear it when we'd go fishing. It reminded me of a lot of great moments we had shared in our life." When someone asked the swimmer to characterize his dad, he described him as "the salt of the earth." "He was a very determined person, much like myself. He was a man of character. He's why I'm here today. He taught me the importance, the values of hard work, determination and never quitting. Never stopping until you achieve your goal." Ron Karnaugh was uncompromising in attributing his father as the one person most responsible for his own accomplishments as a champion— he had been his hero and role-model throughout his life and a day didn't go by when he wasn't thinking about him and what he came to mean to him.

Like Ron Karnaugh, when I think back to my OWN father, I can truthfully say that HE—Howard Leslie Wood--has been one of the great role-models in MY life. And though he's been gone almost half a century now, dying at the relatively young age of 57, there isn't a day goes by that I don't wake up and think of HIM. By no means was he PERFECT but he had a very tender heart and he loved his wife and children as much as any man could.

In fact, I give him the MOST credit for my OWN academic accomplishments throughout the years. My father was by no means an intellectual. In fact, the first time he ever

set foot on a university campus was the day he drove me to my first day of college. He confessed to me that he had flunked grade school twice- once because he contracted tuberculosis and spent a year in a TB sanitarium, and again, because, as he told me, he was "just plain dumb." The truth was, however, that my father was anything BUT dumb. He followed current events and read four newspapers every day. It was from HIM that I developed my OWN love for reading and the news, as well as my addiction to the New York Times crossword puzzle- he'd leave completed crossword puzzle books all over the house. He taught me how to play chess which led to my being elected captain of the chess club in high school; and because we were forever arguing over politics, I eventually became a member of the debating society. He was almost twenty years old when he graduated from high school but he was bound and determined to get his diploma. It was 1937--the height of the Great Depression--and he knew that without that piece of sheepskin, it would be all that harder to make a life for himself and his family when he started one. He was SO serious about the merits of education that when my twin brother and I graduated from high school, his goal was to see the both of us get through college. So he worked two jobs RIGHT UP TO THE DAY HE DIED in order to help pay for our tuitions- he wanted US to have what he himself never could.

Well my dad never lived long enough to see us graduate but he DID see God turn my life around and call me into the ministry and for THAT, I'll always be grateful to God. Now I see myself more of a chip off his block with every passing year. The day I was awarded my doctorate with highest honors, I held that diploma up high and said to myself, "Dad, this is for you for helping to make this all possible!" Yes, I'll always remember him as a good, fair, honest, hard-working, and above all, much-loving father, and I continue to pray I can emulate many of the SAME qualities in my OWN life.

But then, sometimes, it is the CHILD who becomes the role-model to the PARENT. This past week Alex Rodriguez, the famous ballplayer, admitted that he was overcome with emotion following her graduation from high school earlier this month. "I'm crushed. I'm so excited, but then heartbroken," he shared on *CBS This Morning*. "I mean, it goes by so fast." He then opened up about a letter he wrote for her, beginning his post: "Tashi, I can't make time stand still, so my wish for you is to go out in the world with confidence, knowing your worth and believing in yourself. As you move on from one chapter to the next, I'm most proud of who you are as a person. Honest, kind, compassionate, intuitive and wise beyond your years." He concluded it by adding, "As your father, I'm supposed to be your role model. But for the last 18 years, you've been MINE. Proud of you always! Love, Daddy ♡." Natasha will be continuing her academic pursuits at the University of Michigan where she'll be seeking a degree in musical theatre.

If ever there was a time in our history when guidance and support and direction for young people was so desperately needed, it certainly seems NOW. In an age where divorce affects one out of every two households and single-parent families are fast becoming the norm, when homes are abdicating their role of instilling goals and moral values in our children, strong and responsible role-models have become a RARE AND PRECIOUS COMMODITY. Every year, scores of young people are polled and I find myself more than a LITTLE dismayed when I see how actors and athletes and rock stars continue to top their most-admired lists. During the 1950's and 1960's when I was growing up, people like Dwight Eisenhower, Winston Churchill, Albert Schweitzer, Billy Graham, Harry Truman, and Gen. Douglas MacArthur were the Gallup Poll's most admired men, while Eleanor Roosevelt, Queen Elizabeth II, and Helen

Keller topped the Gallup's most admired-women list. The common denominator between them was that most were either shapers of history or figures noted for their inspirational sacrifices.

However, after all the turmoil of the 1960's, the public's taste in heroes underwent a dramatic change as movie actors and rock stars and athletes began to dominate those same lists. Princeton sociologist Suzanne Keller worries that too many of today's heroes are MEDIA CREATIONS: "These people are tapped because they're always featured in the media, especially movies and TV. I'm not sure celebrities are heroes. With many, you could ask: What moral position have they taken in life? What risk have they taken?" Keller calls these show-business figures "idols of consumption- those who entertain or divert you."

Sadly enough, the same might be said of religion and the ministry. The distrust that many now have of clerical figures didn't originate with all the sex abuse revelations coming out of the Catholic Church over the past few decades. The Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, the most celebrated preacher of the 19th century, was ruined after his illicit affair with a member of his congregation was exposed. More recently, during the 1980's, the spotlight turned onto the PTL and Jimmy Swaggart scandals. One three-year survey of religious and secular counselors conducted by the Wisconsin Coalition on Sexual Misconduct found that 11% of the perpetrators were clergymen with 89% of the victims being women- that's a STAGGERING percentage of ministers who have violated their ordination vows as well as broken trust with their own congregations.

Well if it's becoming harder to find appropriate role-models for our young people- in the arts, in our elected leaders, in our sports stadiums, in the classroom, and even in our pulpits, where CAN we find them? Who is there that our young people CAN look to for guidance and inspiration to help them navigate through the crises and confusion of moral choices before them? The Epistle of Titus has an answer for us this morning. It was written by Paul to his young disciple, Titus, and it is filled with practical advice as to how he should conduct himself in his ministry. In our N.T. lesson, the Apostle counsels him about the men and women in the family. He is aware that with age comes honor and wisdom. But Paul understands that old age also leads to deteriorating health and the narrowing circle of friends (as I'm now discovering for MYSELF), to cynicism and bitterness, to self-indulgence and even a loss of faith. Therefore, he tells them to be temperate, serious, sensible, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness.

Similarly, of the older women he bids them to be reverent in their behavior, not slanderers or slaves to drink. They are to teach what is good and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive to their husbands that the word of God that is within them might not be discredited. It is the responsibility of both Christian men and women, at work or in the home, to set an example of quiet dignity for all those under their authority. They are to instruct the younger members of their family in both their word and example.

But Paul's exhortation extends beyond Titus to the WHOLE church. Those in the church are to present themselves as "examples," as "models" of good works to those who are younger, demonstrating Christian integrity and character in all that they say and do. Verse 8 says, "In all things showing thyself a PATTERN of good works." A "pattern" is a model to be copied or a design to be carried out in the manufacture of a product. Thus, when we speak of a PERSON being a "pattern," we mean that he is worthy of imitation, that he is a good example

to be followed for he is a "copy" or "reproduction" of the original. A person who is a "pattern" is a model of life and conduct for another.

Each one of us, at work and in the home, is a "pattern," a model or reflection of those persons, events and influences that have molded our character- whether for good OR bad. A study of 600 teenagers residing in New England's prisons yielded these startling facts as to why they were there: Six out of ten had fathers who drank to excess. Many had mothers in the same condition. Three out of four were permitted by parents to come and go as they pleased- there had been no parental oversight. Seven out of ten had homes where no group or family activities were enjoyed. And for all of them, there had been no church or Sunday School or family devotions. Yes, they all had had patterns but they were negative ones, not positive ones influencing them.

Woodrow Wilson, a devout Christian and son of a Presbyterian minister, once spoke these words to a group of parents while president of Princeton University:

"I get many letters from you parents about your children. You want to know why we people up here in Princeton can't make more out of them and do more for them. Let me tell you the reason we can't. It may shock you just a little, but I am not trying to be rude. The reason is that they are your sons, reared in your homes, blood of your blood, bone of your bone. They have absorbed the ideals of your homes. You have formed and fashioned them. They are your sons. In those malleable, moldable years of their lives you have forever left your imprint upon them."

The President was essentially stating how each one of us, from the molding of our character to the formation of our values, is the product of our early home life and the influences of our family. No one quite has the ability to shape and develop our personalities and habits as our parents and home life. This is why it is so unrealistic to put all the blame on television or our public educational system, on Tick-Tock or Facebook- the fact is that WE and NOT the internet and NOT our nation's school teachers are the primary instiller of values in the life of our young people- and we do it through the example we set for them, and WHERE? IN THE HOME!

Paul is saying here that the CHURCH, IN ADDITION TO the Christian home life we seek to provide, ought to make a difference in the lives of our young people: the CHURCH is the place where role-models are to be developed, where young people can find the encouragement, instruction, and uncritical acceptance they need to make it in a very dangerous, confusing world. For Paul, it is the older members who bear a great responsibility towards the younger- they are to be examples to them of how they should live. However, their lives must first be brought into conformity with their faith. It's a fact that people judge the gospel more by what they SEE than what they hear. The greatest proof as to the reality of Jesus Christ has always been the Christian's OWN life, more so than what one preaches or says. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "You are our epistle...known and read of all men."

Thus, as Christians, we are to be faithful examples or patterns of Christ to the world. Christ is to so permeate our lives that he finds expression in all we say and do. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ," he was saying that his own life was so identified with his Lord's that they could imitate HIS faith, that they could pattern their own lives after HIM even as he patterned HIS life after the Lord. That is, after all,

the definition of a Christian- one who is a copy or "pattern" of Christ. In the same way, if our actions and attitudes faithfully reflect Jesus Christ at work in us, then our lives likewise say, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

If Paul, in another passage, asks us to look to the relationship of Christ to the Church as the model upon which all Christian marriages are to be based, in this morning's text, he asks us to look to Christ as the model or pattern of each of our PERSONAL LIVES. However, he exhorts us to always refer back to the ORIGINAL, to JESUS HIMSELF, to gauge our lives. This is why we read our Bibles and come to church on Sunday mornings- because it helps us to remember the original pattern by which our lives are judged, the model to what our OWN lives are to conform. Our lives must continually be compared for errors and corrected with the ORIGINAL, to JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF, and this we CAN do when we are conscientious about such spiritual disciplines as worship and prayer and Bible study.

What the Apostle exhorted Titus and the early church, he declares to US this morning- that in all things, WE are to show ourselves a pattern of good works, a model of faith and service, and this applies to both our graduates this morning, both Jeremy and Brayden, because THEY'LL probably have families of THEIR OWN one day. By doing so, we testify to our children and friends the reality of Christ's life and power at work in us. And we bear witness to Jesus Christ because we are convinced that HE ALONE provides a sure and reliable guide for human conduct- that HIS is the only life we can trust to empower and direct us amidst all the confusing voices and decisions that confront us. Our text encourages us to look past the athletes and actors and rock stars for our heroes, past the teachers and preachers for our role-models, even past Paul, himself, and the church with all her creeds and sacraments. We are assured that Christ ALONE is worthy to be the one we can model our lives by, deserving above ALL OTHERS to be called our "hero." Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, thank you that no one can ever say they cannot know what you look like or what it is you expect from us for in and through the life of your son, Jesus, you have ultimately revealed yourself and your will. Help us to continually refer to him as a template for our OWN lives and that by looking to him, we can better identify our deficiencies so as to become more like him in every way. In Christ's name we pray, amen.*