

**+ Numbers 12:1-15 + A Love That Imitates Christ + 18th Sunday after Pentecost + 30 September 2012 +**

***“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.”*** Charles Caleb Colton’s famous quote is often used in jest, but there’s a certain element of truth to that proverb. You see it when a little boy dresses up like Daddy and pretends to be just like him or when a little girl imitates her mommy’s beautiful singing. You see it as kids try to play like their favorite athlete or young adults act like their role models. Every one of us imitates someone whether we’re conscious of it or not. Often that imitation is positive, other times not so much. Sometimes it’s touching like when a little boy acts like his grandpa. Sometimes it’s simply funny like when a little girl sincerely tries to imitate her big sister’s make-up with her own or adults find themselves unconsciously acting like their parents. Time and again, the proverb is proven true. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

As Christians, you would expect that every one of us imitates Christ, right? Do you always imitate the humility he showed when others sang his praises? Do you always imitate the patience he had for friends and followers who never seemed to get it? Do you always imitate the love he had for every single soul, especially for those considered “unlovable”? If someone who doesn’t know about Jesus were to look at you and how you live your life, would they see Jesus or something far less flattering?

Yes, there are times when it’s very difficult to “imitate Christ”—times when Christ calls you to ***“love your enemies”*** (Matthew 5:44) in the face of opposition or times when it would be easier to contradict Christ and tell someone what you really think. Still that gives no good reason to poorly imitate Christ, if at all!

Such unflattering imitations caused by sinful natures have plagued God’s people since the time of our first parents, even for those whom you’d expect to be the best imitators of Jesus. We saw that when Jesus’ own disciples fell over themselves trying to prove who would be “the greatest” in Jesus’ kingdom. We see it when a sibling rivalry goes horribly wrong. We meet Miriam, the “big sister”, who after years of faithfully following her brother Moses, tries to humiliate him into getting a piece of the power for herself. We meet Aaron, the older brother with a spine like a wet noodle, who goes along when his “big sister” gets ticked off at Moses. Then we meet Moses, the youngest, yet also the prophet of God appointed to lead God’s people.

You and I need to be careful, because in Miriam and Aaron we see ourselves, and it’s not flattering. In fact, if we were in Moses’ sandals, it wouldn’t be so flattering either. Yet even amidst all the accusations and rivalry, there you see Jesus. Not a miraculous appearance, although God in the form of a glorious cloud settles the matter himself, but through Moses, who with true humility avoids getting caught up in the arguments and jealousy and rivalry. In fact, he shows no bitterness towards his siblings, but instead displays **A LOVE THAT IMITATES CHRIST**.

Things were going downhill quickly. Only a short time before, the Lord had commanded the Israelites to leave Mt. Sinai to make their way towards the land he had promised them, but the closer they got to Canaan, the more they rebelled. As the Lord richly provided food and protection, the people complained all the more against the Lord and rejected his grace. The Lord’s anger burned against the people and many died.

Moses wondered how bad the growing rebellion would get as the large mass of ex-slaves slowly made their way across the barren wilderness. Who knew where the next mutiny would come? Moses certainly didn’t expect it to come from his own family, from his own sister and brother, yet there was Miriam storming up to Moses with Aaron in her wake. With an ethnic slur, they criticized Moses’ foreign-born wife, but this wasn’t about Moses’ wife. It was all about their jealousy over his God-given power.

Miriam was doing all the talking. ***“Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? ...Hasn’t he also spoken through us?”*** Aaron merely nodded his head in agreement. As a prophetess, Miriam had led the women of Israel in singing God’s praises when he brought the Israelites through the Red Sea and rescued them from Pharaoh’s army. As high priest, Aaron had led the sacrifices and worship life of the Israelites, yet God had not appointed them to lead God’s people. He had appointed Moses. Neither Miriam nor Aaron looked anything like the God who loved them, but rather they were filled with spite and jealousy and bitterness. Amazingly, Moses never responded. He didn’t use his position to put them down. No, he humbly kept his mouth shut even as his siblings continued their attacks, but the LORD heard all this.

***“Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you...”***, and the Lord himself appeared in a glorious pillar of cloud. ***“Listen to my words: ‘When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?’”*** At that moment, Miriam and Aaron began to

realize what they had done. Not only had they taken their jealousy and bitterness too far with their younger brother, but they had attacked **“my servant Moses”**—whom God had personally called through a burning bush, Moses through whom the Lord had delivered his two million people from Egyptian slavery, Moses who had personally received God’s Law and even been allowed to live after seeing God himself pass by. God was not about to allow the slurs and attacks of a sibling rivalry tear down the prophet whom he had appointed over his people. Moses himself tells us, **“The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them.”**

**“When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam—leprous, like snow.”** The holy God had carried out his judgment. Those who opposed his chosen prophet would suffer God’s punishment. Miriam was left ceremonially unclean with a life-threatening disease, but Aaron repented for them both to Moses. **“Please, my lord, do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed.”**

What would you expect Moses to do? What would you and I be tempted to do in that situation? We would expect Moses to cry out, “See what you get? It serves you right. You’re getting what you deserve for so rudely rejecting the Lord’s prophet.” We would expect that because we expect to see Moses the unloving sinner standing there, when instead we see a beautiful imitation of Jesus.

**“Moses cried out to the LORD** (of free and faithful grace), **‘O God, please heal her!’**” What? Where’s the rage? The scorn? The put down? They’re not there. What is there is a love that imitates Christ as Moses steps once more into the breach on behalf of the unlovable. Like the Savior to come, Moses humbly intercedes for those who oppose and contradict him to plead for the mercy and grace of God himself—mercy and grace God shows after allowing Miriam to endure seven days of public disgrace for her public rebellion.

How far do you and I have to go before we reach that kind of Christ-like love, before we demonstrate such Christ-like love ourselves? Seeing that kind of love played out in the words and actions of Moses shines the glaring mirror of God’s condemnation on my own personal lovelessness and yours. Have you ever failed to demonstrate a love that imitates Christ? I know I have. Inside you and me is a rebellion against the holy God and his holy will for our lives. “Why should I put up with you, God? Why can’t I have power over my own life? Why should I love people who are so unlovable, so hostile, so rude, so opposed to my viewpoint and my way of thinking?” For that, every one of us deserves worse than Miriam’s leprosy. We deserve eternal death for every time we prove to be selfishly loveless towards God and others.

So is there a solution? Yes. See it in the God of grace and mercy who still forgives those who clearly opposed him. See it in a Savior who still loved his disciples so much when they were unlovable that he gave his life for them. See it in a Savior who still loves you even when you and your life have been so unflattering to him. See it in a Savior who perfectly loved you even to the point of death, even to the point of allowing his holy, precious blood to be shed to wash away the guilt of all your loveless sins and mine. See it in a Savior who willingly took on and conquered the greatest enemy of all—death—so your deserved tomb would be empty someday. See it in a Savior who loves you so much that he is even now preparing a special home in heaven for you and every believer.

See that love for you and then imitate Christ’s love in your own life. Now you might ask, “How do I do that?” See it imitated in Moses’ love for his big sister Miriam. See it demonstrated in Jesus’ undying love for his foolish disciples. Then show a love that imitates Christ to your family—loving your kids even when they’re at their whiniest, loving your spouse even when they let their loveless sinful nature show, loving your parents even when they don’t seem to understand you, loving your siblings even when they argue with you. Show a love that imitates Christ to your friends and neighbors, to your classmates and co-workers—a love that loves in spite of how unlovable another person might be, a love that loves even when you don’t think they deserve it. Even show a love that imitates Christ to your enemies and those who contradict you. Don’t see them as opponents, but as souls whom Jesus loved so much that he lived and died and rose again for them too. Loved by Christ, demonstrate a love that imitates Christ to everyone.

You can imitate that love of Christ in a very Moses-like way when you pray that God would be as gracious to others as he has been to you. It’s so easy to pray that God would judge someone when they seem unlovable, but a love that imitates Christ loves purely because Christ loved you first and strives to show that love by praying for God’s grace on that person.

“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” When it comes to Christ’s love, that’s no joke. When you demonstrate a love that imitates Christ, you ultimately praise the Savior-God who loves you. How do you demonstrate a love that imitates Christ? Fathom the depths of Christ’s love for you in his Word and Sacrament. Then filled with the love of Christ, you can and will demonstrate a love that imitates Christ. Amen.