

Back in October, the Cincinnati Enquirer ran an article entitled, “Celebrity Look-alikes,” about local people who look like famous people. The article opened by saying,

“Ah, the life of a celebrity. People snapping your photo. Fans asking for autographs. Hosts at top restaurants ushering you past long lines to the best tables. Believe it or not, this kind of thing happens to ordinary people in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky every day - people who just happen to look like other very famous people.”

And then the article went on to give examples of local folks who did indeed look like a celebrity and to prove the likeness they, of course, had a photo of both the celebrity and the commoner, side by side.

Well, recently, and much to my surprise, I have been told that there are a few celebrities with whom I share a likeness—that I look, at least, a little bit, like this celebrity. And so, this morning, you get to be the judge of the resemblance. A picture of me and my celebrity look-alike will be displayed together on the screen, and you can decide for yourself whether or not there is a likeness.

The first celebrity look-alike was suggested by Linda Spitzer, daughter-in-law to Jim and Ruth Spitzer, who commented over the weekend that she thought I looked a bit like Ted Danson. You know, the bartender in Cheers. Well, so here’s Ted (show Danson photo) and now here’s me (show my photo). Am I Ted Danson-like, or not?

Then, on New Years Day, at a family gathering, we were watching TV and newscaster Anderson Cooper came on, and a couple of people mentioned that they thought I looked like him. Well, here’s me and Anderson. (show

pictures side by side, replace Danson photo with Cooper photo) What do you think? Do I possess Anderson Cooper-likeness?

And finally, my daughters have told me a few times that they think I look like the picture of Paul Newman that is posted on the bottles of his salad dressing. Well, here's Paul (replace picture of Anderson Cooper with photo of Paul Newman) **not** on a bottle of salad dressing mind you, but next to my mug. Do you think I have any Paul Newman-likeness?

Well regardless, of whether or not I possess a likeness to Ted Danson, or to Anderson Cooper, or to Paul Newman there is somebody, that as a Christian, I am supposed to be like. There is somebody that I am supposed to resemble. And that someone is Jesus Christ. In fact, the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans says,

God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. (Romans 8:29 The Message)

God's plan for us is to look like Christ—to be like Christ. But, of course, that doesn't mean our physical appearance, as if we all need to go out and find a good plastic surgeon to rearrange our faces to look like the face of Jesus. (By the way, nobody really even knows what Jesus looked like. All those pictures you see, that we so commonly identify as Jesus. They come from the imaginations of artists, not from any historical description of the man—Jesus, because there are no physical descriptions of him). No, the kind of likeness that God is aiming for between us and Christ is that our character

should be like his. The content of our character and the content of Christ's character should come to be the same.

Well, as you can imagine, this is no easy task for those of us whose tendency is toward

- self-absorption rather than the selflessness of Jesus,
- whose tendency is to worry and fret rather than relax and trust God,
- whose tendency is to seek revenge rather than forgive,
- whose tendency is to greedily hoard money and things rather than share freely
- whose tendency is to fear those who are different rather than try to understand and embrace them
- whose tendency is to despise our enemies rather than pray for them, do good to them and love them
- whose tendency is to resort to the maxim, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" and who would rather return evil for evil than return evil with good
- whose tendency is toward self-aggrandizement rather than self-sacrifice
- whose tendency is toward egotistical pride rather than humble servant hood, and
- whose tendency is toward apathy and indifference to the suffering of others rather than compassion and care.

Yes, developing Christ-like character is a big job, especially when the raw material God has to work with is somebody like me (and my guess is you are not all that different from me). But fortunately for us, God did not leave us alone in this. We are not on our own, trying to raise ourselves up to Christ-likeness by our own Spiritual bootstraps. No God has given to us, as it says in our scripture lesson for today, help:

It was Christ who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the

knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13 NIV)

God has raised up apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and others in the church whose calling it is to help me, you, and every Christian to become like Christ, or as Paul puts it, “attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

But it is not just these, what you might think of as, specialized roles or functions within the church, that Paul is talking about here. It’s not just the clergy. No! He says “to each one of us grace has been given through the generosity of Christ.” Every Christian shares in Christ’s bounty. No one is unimportant. No one is useless. No one is negligible in the life of the church. Everyone has something from Christ that they bring to the church that is important and needed. Thus, if we, as individuals and as a church, are going to become like Christ, we are going to need each other to do it. God made the church that way. The church is where the content of our character is molded and shaped and developed to be like that of Jesus Christ. Through the influence of our fellow Christians, utilizing their gifts, and simply expressing themselves as the unique persons God has created them to be, our character development takes place and we become more like Jesus. Therefore, I need you. You need me. And you need that Christian brother or sister sitting next to you. In fact, you even need that Christian brother or sister who annoys you, the one who makes you uncomfortable, as well as the one who makes you feel wonderful. As Paul says:

Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own

special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. (Ephesians 4:15-16 NLT)

“As each part does its own special work,” says Paul, “it helps the other parts grow.” That is why there is no such thing as a “lone ranger” Christian. People can’t grow in Christ-likeness unless there are other Christian people around to stimulate that growth. Sure, we can fool ourselves into thinking we are mature and becoming like Christ if we isolate ourselves from the church, and there is no one around to challenge our presumption. But real Christ-likeness, real maturity develops in the midst of our relationships. In relationship, we challenge each other in the church. We hold each other accountable. We support and encourage each other. We pray for each other. We teach and advise each other. We speak the truth in love to one another, and in so doing, “grow in every way more and more like Christ.”

And that is why we, as a church, have recently adopted, as one of our core values, the notion that, “We Support the Spiritual Journey of All Toward Christ-likeness,” because, in point of fact, if we are not doing that, we are not an authentic church of Jesus Christ. Because, helping people become more like Jesus, as the Bible makes plain, is what the church is all about. It is the job, the calling, the purpose of each one of us.

As many of you know at last Sunday’s congregational meeting, we voted to move from two worship services on Sunday morning: one traditional and one contemporary, to a single unified service incorporating both traditional and contemporary elements. According to the motion that was passed, this move to a single unified service will happen no later than Sunday, March

30th, thus allowing time for some development of this new kind of service before it is unveiled. But the reason I bring this up, aside from letting everyone know what transpired at the meeting, is that in the process of getting to this point, (where as a church we have decided to make this change), I have personally experienced the truth of this passage. People in the church have come to me, come to my office, and speaking the truth in love, have questioned me and challenged me and wrestled with me during this change process. And through these interactions, you folks have helped me see things that I would, otherwise, not have seen. You were able to bring into focus things that were fuzzy for me. Speaking the truth in love you helped me become, I hope, a little bit better pastor, and enabled me to be of more help to this congregation as we negotiate our way through this process of change. I do believe I've become just a little bit more like Christ because of you. And I've come to recognize, just how much I needed what you had to say at the time you came to me and said it. And I can affirm as true, from my own experience, what our scripture text for today says,

As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.
(Ephesians 4:16 NLT)

And I want to thank those of you who have come to me, for supporting me in my spiritual journey toward Christ-likeness, and in so doing, for being the church that Christ has called us to be.

Jim Wallis writes in his best selling book, "The Call to Conversion" about how when he was a university student, he was unsuccessfully evangelized by almost every Christian group on campus. His basic response to their preaching was, "How can I believe when I look at the way the church lives?"

They answered, "Don't look at the church; look at Jesus."

But Wallis says, that statement is one of the saddest in the history of the church. It puts Jesus on a pedestal apart from the people who name his name. Belief in him becomes an abstraction removed from any demonstration of its meaning in the world. Such thinking is a denial of what is most basic to the gospel: incarnation. People should be able to look at the way we as Christians live and begin to understand what the gospel is about. Our lives must tell them who Jesus is and what he cares about. Our churches and our lives must be Christ-like.

Let us pray: