

Any of you who are Face book users know that it is full of quick little quizzes you can take to learn more about yourself. Quizzes such as: Who do you most resemble in your living, your thinking and your everyday life? It’s just five questions and will take less than two minutes. And faster than you can say, “Stupid Internet quiz with no scientific value whatsoever,” you’ll know which dead president shares your pessimism or which old-school comic-book super hero happens to have something in common with you. “Congratulations, you have anger issues like The Hulk.” “You’re prone to patriotic acts of heroism like Captain America.” This is clearly information that you cannot live without. Plus, through the power of social networking, you can share the results with everyone you have ever met.

It is strange that such things are so popular in a culture that idolizes the idea of individuality. In 21st-century America, ingenuity is the ideal. Conformity isn’t. Originality is everything, right? So why the popularity of such things on Facebook?

Perhaps our interest reveals something inherent to our humanity; perhaps it gives us a clue as to how we’re wired to live. Individuality may be the cultural ideal, but there is a longing within us to be similar to those we admire. Essentially, human beings are creatures of conformity; we are inherently imitators of the world around us. Imitation is how we learn to be human at every level. We learn to speak by imitating our parents. We learn to walk by watching other kids. We create our own “unique” identity by imitating our teenage friends in high school and following our friends as adults. As parents we often become our own parents, both with kids and spouses. Finally, we seek mentors in our professions and try to become like them.

Many of the things we conform to are innocent, such as table manners or taste in music. But others have lasting ramifications. Our work ethic, our attitude toward other people, and our spirituality are things we pick up from others. Even things such as smoking or a being chronically discontent can be the byproduct of the influences around us.

We are what we imitate, and we all have a mosaic of influences from people in our past and present. We conform to the image of others, and right now somebody else is watching us and conforming to us.

This understanding brings great weight to the words of Paul, writing to the Christians in Philippi. Here Paul gives a loving but firm command. It's one we've heard him offer numerous times in his letters to the churches in Corinth and Thessalonica, as well as Philippi. Paul writes, "Join in imitating me, and keep your eyes upon those who walk according to the example you have in us."

Paul doesn't ask us to be innovators but imitators. Innovation in the Christian life can easily become misdirection. Paul instead suggests imitation as the way to go. Paul acknowledges that we are creatures of conformity. What Paul is telling the Philippians — what he's telling us — is simply this: "You're going to mimic someone's steps and mirror someone's movements when it comes to learning about your faith. That's how we work as human beings. So if you're going to imitate somebody, go ahead and imitate me. Follow me, as I follow Jesus."

Paul elsewhere suggests that whenever we see people living a Christ-focused life that he tried to model for the early church, we should keep our eyes locked upon that person. So that just like a child absorbing every move from her mother, we observe and learn how we are to live. Imitation is key to the Christian life. In fact, a book which has been described as the single most influential book in Christian literature was published in 1420 with the title, "The Imitation of Christ" by Thomas A' Kempis. In our culture, conformity can be deadly, but in Christian spirituality, conformity is a good thing. When we conform to the likeness of Christ, we lean into faith. Just as John Wesley told the early Methodist Circuit Riders who were filled with doubt and fear, "Preach faith until you have faith." Act like those you admire and you will become like them.

Today we are celebrating Epiphany in the Christian Calendar, a day which means appearance or manifestation. It commemorates the manifestation of the Christ child to the world, symbolized in Matthew's Gospel by the visit of the 3 Wise Men to Bethlehem about 12 days after his birth. Epiphany is a day of hope and new beginnings, when we consider what it means that pure love in human form was unleashed upon the world. What does it mean this story that has 3 very important rulers drop everything to travel a huge distance and follow a star? I suspect that they not only wanted to honor this newborn King, but to learn from him, experience him. What does it mean that his birth was considered so important that we number our years around it, and continue to believe we should manifest his coming into the world? And who exactly is this the person we are supposed to follow and emulate? You could spend a lifetime studying the life of Jesus and

never fully comprehend who he was. But we consider him worth knowing or we would not be here today. We consider his teachings and values to be significant and worthy of imitation. Epiphany reminds us that his influence continues to be manifested in the world, and we are responsible for keeping that influence alive in a world which needs his light more than ever before.

The book of Romans tells us that all those who are baptized in Christian faith have embarked on a lifelong journey of being “conformed to the image” of Jesus (Romans 8:29). That is, if we are intentional and faithful, we will slowly but surely grow into his likeness. Not in every way, of course, we are human and we will fall and fail. But if you take your faith seriously you will undoubtedly grow in generosity, goodness, hope and love. One of the primary ways this happens is in Christian community. By imitating one another in the faith, we begin to resemble and reflect the object of our faith. Imitation is key to our sanctification.

This is why it is so important for you to show up here. To worship, study, learn, share, and participate in our spiritual life together we can be more like Jesus.

The bottom line is that if you are not consciously choosing to follow anybody or anything, then that void of influence in your life will be filled. And it will be filled by someone or something that is not necessarily positive.

So... who are you imitating? Celebrities, athletes, your parents, friends? Are you learning to think like a millionaire, look like a super model, cook like Rachel Ray, sing like Taylor Swift? From whom are you learning what it means to live as a thoughtful, spiritual person in this messed-up world? In those you emulate, it is always good to look up—to God, of course, but also to those smarter, kinder, more spiritually advanced. And then there are times when it is beneficial to look down, because you can actually learn a thing or two from those you might judge to be your inferiors or subordinates.

And, incidently, you can learn a thing or two from your dog. How many of you have dogs? There is a youtube video was brought to my attention this past week that will be of interest to you. It's called God and Dog.... Let's watch [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H17edn\\_RZoY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H17edn_RZoY)

In the imitation of others we can look up or down, and perhaps if we all acted more like dogs this world would be a better place.

Who is imitating you? If you have children, this one is easy to answer. Every parent remembers that chilling moment when your child says or does something which you have said or done many times, but it seems terribly wrong when it comes from your child. But it is not only our children who imitate us. Friends,

neighbors, co-workers, everyone in our sphere of influence are affected by our attitudes and actions. This is a universal truth that is more powerful than you know. Think of all of the people who have influenced you over the years—family members, teachers, coaches, athletes. My guess is that many of them did not even know they influenced you, and some may not have known you at all. So how are you living so that others watching can be positively influenced by your words, actions and attitude?

Human beings are creatures of conformity; we are inherent imitators. The question is not if your life will resemble someone else's but whose life yours will resemble.

As of now, there's no quick, five-minute quiz that can tell us how well we're doing in becoming like Christ. But we can gauge our spiritual growth by looking at our lives. How are our relationships, our attitude, our outlook, our peace of mind? What do others see when they get a glimpse into our hearts and minds?

I invite you to consider whose footsteps you are following in today. And who is coming along to walk in yours? Chances are you will be convicted by what you see — or by what you don't see.

But take heart. If you don't like what's in front of you or what is behind you, remember that with God's help we can always be changed. And there is no better way to have our hearts changed than by being open to the Holy Spirit, through the Sacrament of Holy Communion that we are about to receive.

*(Some ideas from Homiletics, Jan-Feb, 2010)*