

+++ In the Name of Jesus +++

Date: October 6, 2024 (20th Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 22, series B)

Title: “Jesus, A Perfect Copy”

Text: Hebrews 2:9-18

As some of you know, I’ve been doing some research over the last little while about Pastor Bill Doeling—the first Lutheran pastor to offer services in this area, starting in 1938. Nowadays we send out a newsletter every week by email, to keep everybody posted about what’s going on. Back then, Pastor Doeling mailed out copies of a newsletter every few months, using something called a hectograph to duplicate them. Do any of you know what a hectograph was? Basically, it was an early type of copying system.

- First, Pastor Doeling wrote out his notices on a sheet of ordinary paper using a special pen filled with aniline dye.
- Then, he pressed that sheet of paper down onto a gelatin pad, to transfer that specially-prepared image onto that gelatin.
- Then, he would have pressed down sheets of ordinary paper, one by one, onto that gelatin pad, to make as many copies as he wanted. Apparently he was sending out 15 to 20 copies of his newsletter to households here in the Parksville-Coombs area.

Here in today’s second reading, we hear about just one copy being made—much farther back in the past, centuries before the hectograph was even invented. I’m referring of course to Jesus, our Lord—who was a complete and accurate “copy” of our humanity.

Mostly, the New Testament puts more stress on Jesus’ originality than on him being a copy. On Easter Sunday, for instance, Thomas called Jesus “My Lord and my God”—titles that couldn’t be applied to anybody else. (John 20:28) A little later, Peter preached that “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven, given among human beings, by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) Both of those passages emphasize Jesus’ uniqueness—the fact that he was a “one-off,” a “special edition,” the ONLY-begotten Son of God the Father. Obviously, that’s a very important part of our faith in Jesus. We believe that he alone—unique among human beings of all times and places—he alone has shared in God’s glory since the very beginning, and will go on sharing God’s glory for all eternity. As we’re going to confess again next Sunday, in the words of the Nicene Creed, we believe that Jesus is

“the only-begotten Son of God:
begotten of his Father before all worlds,
God of God, light of light, [true] God of [true] God,
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father.”

Jesus, in other words, is not just a copy, facsimile, or “second-rate representation” of God the Father. The two of them are made out of exactly the same stuff.

Here in this reading from Hebrews, though, the author is making a different point. He’s not emphasizing Jesus’ uniqueness but rather his commonness—his oneness with all of us human beings. “He had to be made like the descendants of Abraham in every way,” we hear toward the end of this text—“in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and so that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.” (v.17)

One of the things I appreciate about the photocopier that Carol and I use in our office

today, is its speed. Once it's warmed up, it cranks out 26 copies a minute. (I think Pastor Doeling would have been envious!) It's interesting, though, to notice in the pages of the New Testament how slowly Jesus became our "exact copy." That process began with his miraculous conception in the body of the Virgin Mary, through the "overshadowing" power of the Holy Spirit. (Luke 1:35) I don't know if you've ever thought of this before or not—but why did both Jesus and his mother have to go through the full 9 months of a normal pregnancy, after such a miraculous conception? When you stop and think about it, if the Holy Spirit was able to make Mary conceive in a supernatural way in the first place, surely he could have given her a full-term baby right away—weeks, days, or even just minutes before delivery! Wouldn't that have been something? Every pregnant woman since then, would have had even more reason than they already do, to call Mary "blessed among women!" (Luke 1:48)

The reason why things couldn't be rushed along though (in that way) is hinted at in Paul's letter to the Galatians. "When the time had fully come," Paul writes, "God sent his Son: born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who are under the law." (Gal 4:4-5) What Paul is getting at there, is that the whole point of Jesus' coming-into our flesh was so that he could become our substitute—our stand-in, really—a substitute for all of us who are conceived, and born, and live, and die, under the relentless accusation of God's Law.

Think about Jesus (in that way) maybe sort of like a Hollywood stuntman—a highly-skilled individual who "stands in for" somebody else who's a lot more valuable to the bosses than they are. Whenever the script calls for something to be done that's really difficult or dangerous, it's that "stunt-man" who jumps in to do that scene, so that that the more-valuable person who's actually there at the centre of the script, doesn't have to face that risk.

That's kind of what Jesus does for us. The "script" God wrote for all of us human beings to follow, calls for us to be perfect in every way. "Be holy," God says again and again in the book of Leviticus, "because I am holy!" (Lev 11:44, 45; 21:8). The problem is, none of us can actually do that—even though we literally "die trying." We sin so often—as we confessed a few minutes ago, "in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone!" And that sin threatens us with death every day—no matter how hard we try to live up to that impossible demand that's written down, right there, in that script.

Even so, you and I are still "the stars of the show," as far as our heavenly Father is concerned! That's why he arranged for Jesus to be our SUBSTITUTE... our stand-in... our stuntman—so that he, Jesus, could suffer in his own body the punishment we deserve (but are totally unable to bear). And Jesus did such a good job of becoming our stand-in, that not even God the Father could tell the difference. "God made him, who had no sin, to be sin for us," Paul writes with a mixture of joy and astonishment in 2 Corinthians—"so that, in him, we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor 5:21)

That process of "becoming an exact copy" (even to the extent of "becoming sin" for us)—that process took Jesus a lifetime to complete. Forget about 26 copies a minute: it took Jesus 33 years to become our copy—from conception, to birth, to childhood, to teenager-hood, and all the way through to mature adulthood (which in that culture began at the age of 30—right at the time he began his teaching ministry). (Luke 3:23)

The result of that long and arduous "copying" process was terrific—a fully complete example of TRUE humanity! That, in fact, was one of the reasons a lot of people who saw Jesus struggled to "believe in him"—he was so totally "like them," they couldn't wrap their minds around the fact that he was their Saviour. "The crowd [in his hometown] were astonished at him," Mark tells us: "Isn't this the carpenter?," they asked; "Isn't this Mary's son, and the

brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?"(Mark 6:2-3) Jesus "fit in with them" so naturally, so fully, and so completely, they just didn't get it that he was also different enough from them to be their Saviour!

As this reading says, though, the similarities between us and Jesus went even deeper than anything those folks saw on the surface. "Jesus suffered when he was tempted," we heard—why?—so he could "help those who are being tempted." (v.18) It's not the same (even on a human level) to take your marriage problem to somebody who's single... your financial struggle to somebody who's rich... your health challenge to somebody who's hardly ever seemed to suffer. We need a helper who's "been there, done that"—somebody who "understands on the inside" whatever it is we're going through. That's what this letter to the Hebrews shows us, over and over again!—a Saviour who can relate to us in everything... even when we're tempted. Two weeks from now, our second reading is going to be drawn from Hebrews 4, and tells us that "[Jesus] was tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence," that reading says, "so that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Heb 4:15-16) Whatever kind of sin, temptation, test, or trial you and I have to face, Jesus has been there before us. He knows what it's like to face all of the seven deadly sins:

pride, coveting, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and laziness. Because he is such a faithful copy of our full humanity—accurate down to the very last detail (except in this, that he never gave in to temptation)—oh yes, you and I can always take all of our troubles to Jesus, and be sure that he will understand. He knows every temptation, quandary, and dilemma we face—and he has already endured them, and won the victory over them, for us.

The shocking part of this story, though, is this. Jesus, our perfect copy, was doomed from the start for the discard bin... the dumpster. That is where WE (the people he was copied from) deserve to be "pitched," because of the depth and extent of our sin. As the Lord told the prophet Ezekiel, "The soul that sins will die"—and not just for a moment either, but forever, in the burning garbage-dump that the Gospels call Gehenna, but we usually translate as "hell." (We heard about hell several times in last week's Gospel, as you may remember—a place "where the fire is never quenched.") (Mark 9:43, 46, 47) As the Psalmist says about all of us: "God looks down from heaven on the children of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. [But no!] Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one." (Psalm 53:2-3) When God compares us to that perfect standard he requires of us, in the Ten Commandments, he sees that we are very poor copies indeed.

By contrast to that word of judgement from the Psalms, though, hear now also this word of promise, forgiveness, and hope from Isaiah.

"Surely HE [the Messiah] took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...

HE was pierced for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was upon HIM, and by HIS wounds we are healed....

The Lord has laid on HIM the iniquity of us all." (Isa 53:4-6)

That's the Great Good News at the heart of our faith! God has laid all of our sins on JESUS, so that he could PAY for them all, for us. Jesus, in that sense, was very much like a stunt-man, taking all the blows and wounds and damage and punishment that should have been ours, and "completing that whole sequence" for us. And because he did all of that for us, we are completely "undamaged," in God's sight—no bruises, broken bones, gashes, or contusions

whatsoever. Our Saviour has spared us from everything that we, by our sins, have deserved. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” Paul writes to the Christians in Rome. “Through Christ Jesus, we have been set free from the law of sin and death! For what the law was powerless to do (in that it was weakened by the sinful nature), GOD DID by sending his own Son, in the likeness of sinful flesh, to deal with sin. And so God condemned sin in sinful flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met.” (Rom 8:2-4)

Now that Jesus has done all of that for us, he calls us, in turn, to “copy him.”

- “Come, follow me,” he says.
- “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”
- “If anyone would come after me, they [too] must deny themselves and take up their own cross and follow me.”
- “As the Father has sent me, so I am now sending you.”

Those are just a few of the ways Jesus expects us who have been saved by his faithful duplication of us, will also now duplicate him, out there in the world! The same way that one good “master copy” can crank out a dozen, a hundred, or a thousand copies that are basically the same as itself... so Jesus too calls us to become “little Christs.” That’s what the word “Christian” means, you know! We are to be copies, duplicates, models of our Saviour’s own sacrificial life, and love for the world.

- He offered himself as a “ransom for many”—so, you and I too are called to offer our time, talents, and treasures in service to others. (Matt 20:28)
- He “invited little children to come to him, and he placed his hands on them” (as we heard in today’s Gospel reading)—so, you and I are called to show Christ’s love in actions as well as words, to those who are small, needy, and helpless, in our own midst and in the community around us. (Mark 10:14)
- The same way Jesus (again, in today’s Gospel) calls us to be faithful to the spouses we’ve committed ourselves to, so too all of us are called to be faithful back to himself, in thanks for his own permanently-committed love for us.

What a wonderful gift this is—Jesus’s own great ministry among us. He willingly “became our copy,” by taking onto himself our humanity, temptations, and sins, and by going through all the suffering they led to, all the way through death and the grave.

Now, as we put our trust in him, and seek to follow him: may Jesus our Saviour enable us to conform ourselves to his image—to the glory of his name and the growth of his kingdom!
AMEN!