

Introduction: Good morning, and welcome to Chapel. My name is Kerry Kuehn; I serve in the Physics Department here at Wisconsin Lutheran College. I have been asked to make the following announcements before we begin...

Overview: The theme for today is “God’s Foundation Endures.” We will be using the order of General Devotion on page 20 in your service bulletin. After the invocation, we will sing Hymn 490.

Invocation: In the name of the father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen**

Hymn 490: *Love in Christ is Strong and Living*, verses 1-3.

Lesson:

Our text for today comes from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. You may recall that Paul had founded this congregation in the bustling Greek city of Corinth around 50 A.D. He then went on to travel about, founding other congregations. Apollos had become the pastor of the Church in Corinth. But there were problems at the Church. Bad choices were being made. They had chosen to tolerate openly immoral behavior. They had also chosen to form factions within the church: some Christians claimed to follow Paul. Some claimed to follow Apollos. Some claimed to follow Peter. And some claimed to have no role-models at all except for Christ himself. Apparently these factions were causing stresses within the congregation. So Paul wrote to remind them of the true foundation of the Church. He writes:

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Some questions are easy to answer: Should I wear a coat today? Should I stop my car at the gates, or should I try to beat this oncoming train? Is it wrong for one person to own another as a slave? Should I show up for the final exam in my philosophy class?

Some questions, on the other hand, are not so easy to answer: Should I give my coat to this homeless person? Is it wise to have a train running through the center of my town? Is the military draft another form of slavery? Should a liberal arts college have a philosophy department?

I think part of the reason why some questions are easy to answer—and some choices are easy to make—is that the consequences are felt almost immediately. If I don't wear a coat and in the winter, I immediately suffer from the cold. What makes other choices difficult is that we know that we will not suffer the consequences right away. Such choices reveal their consequences only very gradually: after months, or years, or even generations. So there is no immediate feedback to know whether or not we've made the right choice. Nonetheless we sense, or fear, that the difficult choices which we are forced to make right now may very well have a profound impact on ourselves, our families, and our society in the distant future. So we grudgingly make the choice, and then we must wait patiently, and watch, and somehow interpret subsequent events in light of our long-past choice which we can never change.

Ayn Rand, a 20th century author and philosopher, wrote an essay entitled *What Art Is*. In this essay she recognized that certain choices—particularly ones involving moral principles—can be very difficult to make, especially when they are made under time-pressure. How can one quickly calculate the best choice when faced with a complex situation involving multiple and competing moral principles? When making such on-the-spot choices, it is usually impractical to get out a sheet of paper and start writing down the *pros* and *cons* of various courses of action.

In such situations, Rand claimed, art—and more specifically the power of the image—is very helpful. By envisioning the image of a hero—an Atticus Finch, an Antigone, a Thomas More, the Batman, or (in Rand’s case) a Howard Roark—one is given the power to see through the complexities of a moral puzzle and to simply know what the hero would do. The very image of the hero provides immediate inspiration and moral clarity.

You just might agree with Rand here. Perhaps you have a certain person whose image you hold in your mind and who, upon thinking about them, provides you with a sense of purpose, or courage, or moral clarity in your own decision making. The Roman stoic philosopher Seneca, who lived around the time of Jesus, thought this same way. He wrote a series of letters to his young friend, Lucilius, in which he advised the youth to

Cherish some man of high character, and keep him ever before your eyes, living as if he were watching you, and ordering all your actions as if he beheld them. . . . the soul should have someone whom it can respect, – one by whose authority it may make even its inner shrine more hallowed. Happy is the man who can make others better, not merely when he is in their company, but even when he is in their thoughts! And happy also is he who can so revere a man as to calm and regulate himself by calling him to mind! . . . Choose a master whose life, conversation, and soul-expressing face have satisfied you; picture him always to yourself as your protector or your pattern. For we must indeed have someone according to whom we may regulate our characters; you can never straighten that which is crooked unless you use a ruler.

Seneca’s advice is, I think, sound advice. And here is where I’d like to make a connection to our Scripture lesson for today from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Perhaps these Christians were initially thinking along the same lines when they began to look up to and emulate certain leaders, such as Paul or Peter or Apollos. Perhaps they, too, were looking to certain role-models out of love, or admiration, or to find moral clarity when seeking answers to complex problems. After all, Paul was one of the greatest of the early Christians. So was Peter, and so was Apollos.

Would the Corinthians be wrong in seeking to emulate Peter or Paul or Apollos? Was Paul in fact telling the Corinthians that they should not have role-models? Certainly not. How do we know? Because in the very next chapter of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes:

...in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me.

And in his letter to the Philippians Paul urges them to

...be imitators of me, brothers and sisters, and watch carefully those who are living this way, just as you have us as an example.

In fact, in many places in Scripture, the faithful are held up as role-models to imitate. So what is Paul saying in this letter?

He is simply reminding them of the enduring foundation: the person and work of Christ. Here, then, is the main point I'd like to make: While we may choose certain role-models because of their wisdom, or their courage, or their benevolence, God chose us despite our foolishness, and our stubbornness and our wickedness. Yes: While we may choose certain role-models *because* of their wisdom, or their courage, or their benevolence, God chose us *despite* our foolishness, and our stubbornness and our wickedness.

While we were yet in our sins, Christ chose us. Not because he admired us, but because he loved us. He set aside his throne in heaven. He took on flesh. He lived a perfect life of obedience. He gave himself for us and rose triumphantly on Easter morning—to the astonishment of all the witnesses. And his love endures forever. To this day, he gives us the waters of baptism to put to death our old Adam and create in us daily a new life. He gives us His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. And he sends out shepherds and ministers to preach forgiveness and salvation in His name.

This is what the apostle Paul is reminding the Corinthians of in this passage. He is reminding them—and us—of the enduring foundation. The noble virtues of Paul or Apollos or Peter simply pale in comparison to the person and work of Christ. He is the hero—the God-man—who suffered and died to redeem his creation. No one can compare to Him.

Please rise for prayer (special prayers?): Today in our prayers we remember Philemon and Onesimus. No, these are not WLC alumni. Philemon was a prominent first-century Christian who owned a slave named Onesimus. Although the name *Onesimus* means “useful,” Onesimus proved himself “useless” when he ran away from his master and perhaps even stole from him. Somehow Onesimus came into contact with the apostle Paul while the latter was in prison, and through Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel, he became a Christian. After confessing to the apostle that he was a runaway slave, Onesimus was directed by Paul to return to his master and become “useful” again. In order to help pave the way for Onesimus’s peaceful return home, Paul sent him on his way with a letter addressed to Philemon, a letter in which he urged Philemon to forgive his slave for running away and to “receive him as you would receive me”, “no longer as a slave but...as a beloved brother”. The letter was eventually included by the Church as one of the books of the New Testament.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, You sent Onesimus back to Philemon as a brother in Christ, freeing him from his slavery to sin through the preaching of the apostle Paul. Cleanse the depths of sin within our souls and bid resentment cease for past offenses, that, by Your mercy, we may be reconciled to our brothers and sisters and our lives will reflect Your peace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen**

Blessing: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. **Amen**