

Be Like Jesus
Acts 9:32-43, Philippians 2:1-13
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Back in the mid-1990s, the beverage company Gatorade ran a series of commercials starring basketball player Michael Jordan. They had Jordan doing all the things that only Michael Jordan can do – dunking basketballs over his opponents’ heads, draining three-pointers with effortless ease, dribbling around the other players like they’re stuck in quicksand, all while this bouncy, jaunty music sings in the background, “Be Like Mike, Be Like Mike, I want to be Like Mike.” And then the commercial ends with the slogan, Be Like Mike. Drink Gatorade. Which makes sense, because if I really want to be Like Mike, I can’t do all those other things. I can’t dunk a basketball. I can barely throw a basketball. If I use all my concentration and both hands, I can bounce a basketball maybe twice, before it hits my foot and rolls off into the corner. So I can’t be like Michael Jordan in any of the important ways that actually make Michael Jordan special, but I can drink Gatorade, so if I really want to be like Mike, that’s probably my only option.

So yes, it’s hard to be like Mike. But as hard as that might be, some things are even harder. Every week we come together here on Sunday, and we talk about how we want to be like Jesus. It’s in the hymns we sing, it’s in the scriptures we read, it’s in the sermons and the prayers. You probably remember the slogan – WWJD – what would Jesus Do? Make sure you ask

yourself that question every day and then do your best to do it, Do what Jesus did, Be like Jesus, Be like Jesus, Be like Jesus, We want to be like Jesus.

And that's hard. I mean, if being like Michael Jordan was tough, being like Jesus is much, much more difficult. Michael Jordan could probably dunk on Jesus without too much trouble, but Jesus can heal blind people. Michael Jordan can shoot three-pointers, but Jesus can bring the dead back to life. Michael Jordan drinks Gatorade, but Jesus turns water into wine. And that is much, much harder. So if I can't dunk or dribble well enough to be like Mike, I certainly can't wander into a hospital or a cemetery and start healing and raising the dead like Jesus did, and as much fun as it would be to turn on the tap and have wine come out, it's not going to happen. It's not in my skill set.

Now, of course I know that when we say Be Like Jesus, we're not really talking about the miracles, we're talking about loving each other the way Jesus loves, forgiving others as Jesus forgave us, sacrificing our comforts and security for the good of others just as Jesus did for us, but even then, I'm not so sure that's all that much easier. It's hard for us to love our families, people we know well and live with every day, let alone our enemies, people who hurt us and cause trouble in the world. Jesus loved his enemies so perfectly that he died for them, he forgave them for killing him while they were still killing him, but we struggle to forgive little social indignities like somebody cutting you off in traffic. Being like Jesus, loving like Jesus, forgiving like Jesus, that is not easy. Asking yourself What Would Jesus Do is one thing, but actually doing it,

actually following through on that question and Being Like Jesus, that is really, really hard.

But if you think Being Like Jesus is hard for you, it was even harder for Peter. Peter spent years following Jesus, learning from Jesus, spending every waking moment with Jesus, and yet as hard as Peter tried, he could never quite figure out how to be like Jesus. All throughout their time together during Jesus' ministry on earth, Peter kept messing up, kept falling short, and Jesus kept bailing him out, again and again and again. Peter is impulsive when Jesus is patient. Peter is arrogant when Jesus is humble. And despite all the mercy and grace Jesus showed him, despite all the second, third, seventy seven chances Jesus gave Peter, when the moment finally arrived when Peter had to be like Jesus, he failed, completely failed. The night Jesus was arrested, first Peter takes his sword and tries to fight off the soldiers all by himself, cutting off someone's ear, and then when Jesus is on trial and Peter is cornered by his enemies, he denies ever knowing Jesus, he sells out his friend to save his own skin. Peter swings between fury and cowardice, anger and fear, and in the end he is left weeping alone in the night, convinced he will never, never, never Be like Jesus.

And yet when Jesus rises from the dead on Easter Sunday and prepares to ascend into heaven, leaving the disciples to continue his work, Jesus puts Peter in charge of his church. He tells Peter he is the rock that the church will be built on, that it is up to Peter to lead the church into the future, to take over leadership of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth from Jesus himself. That

is a tough act to follow for a guy whose biggest success so far is walking on water for a couple seconds before giving in to his fear and sinking like a Rock. Jesus hands over the entire operation to someone who seems entirely unqualified to actually lead the church the way Jesus led the church. Of all the people in the world you would expect to be like Jesus, Peter is at the bottom of the list.

And yet it works. All the way through the book of Acts, the church grows like crazy, and every step of the way, Peter is there, leading, healing, teaching, preaching. All the way through the book of Acts, Peter acts just like Jesus, doing all the things that Jesus did, in a way that he was never able to do back in the gospels. And here in our reading today, we can see that as plain as day – first Peter heals a paralyzed man named Aeneas, just like Jesus did so many times, like the paralyzed man in Peter's hometown of Capernaum whose friends were so eager to get help, they tore a hole in the roof of Jesus' house just to bring their friend to Jesus. Peter would've remembered that, remembered Jesus telling the paralyzed man to get up and pick up your bed, because when he heals Aeneas, he tells him almost the same thing – get up and make your bed. And then, even more amazing, Peter raises a woman from the dead – Tabitha was dead, and Peter brings her back to life. And if there was any doubt that Peter is acting like Jesus here, think back to the moment in the gospels when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. Do you remember that story? Peter sure does. When Jesus went to Jairus' house, the only disciples who came in with him were Peter, James and John –

Peter was there when Jesus spoke to Jairus' daughter and said, Talitha kum – which means, little girl, Get up. And now here we are, all these years later, and Peter is standing alone in this room, remembering that moment with Jesus where he said Talitha Koum, little girl get up, and Peter says, Tabitha kum – Tabitha, get up. It's almost identical, only changing one letter – Talitha becomes Tabitha, but it's the same miraculous deliverance from death, first by Jesus, now by Peter. Here we see Peter saying the same things, doing the same things that Jesus said and did, first for Aeneas and then for Tabitha, Peter acts just like Jesus, he does what Jesus did. It sure looks like Peter has finally figured out how to be like Jesus.

Except that I still think that if you asked Peter, I think he would disagree. I think Peter wouldn't want any of the credit, any of the praise for doing what Jesus does, for being like Jesus. Take a closer look at that story. When Peter is alone in the room with Tabitha, the first thing he does is he prays. He calls for help, help from the one who he spent all those years following, the one he knows can raise the dead. And take a look at what Peter says when he heals the paralyzed man. When Peter meets Aeneas, he says to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you." According to Peter, this is not his miracle. This is not his accomplishment. Peter didn't heal Aeneas. This is not Peter, the great and powerful Peter, figuring out how to be like Jesus. According to Peter, the one who has been doing all these miracles, the one who healed Aeneas and raised Tabitha from the dead, the one who's been leading the church all this time, it isn't Peter. It's Jesus. It's still Jesus. Peter hasn't figured out how to

be like Jesus. He's realized that Jesus is still with him. Jesus Christ is still working through him, working in him, so that what he does isn't his own work – it's the work of Jesus Christ. Peter doesn't have to be like Jesus, he just has to be with Jesus, and Jesus will do the impossible through him. Jesus will keep healing the sick and raising the dead, Jesus will keep building the church and changing the world, and all Peter has to do is go along for the ride, keep walking with Jesus wherever he leads, keep being the hands and feet of his saviour at work in the world.

That's what Paul is talking about in that passage we read from Philippians. Paul tells the church that we need to have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had, we need to be like Jesus, but the way we do that isn't through what we do. Being like Jesus isn't about how great we are, how strong we are, how wise and powerful and loving we are. The way we can be like Jesus is in how Jesus let God work through him, by humbling himself and lowering himself, taking on the nature of a servant and allowing God's will to be done in his life, even to the point of death on a cross. Paul tells us that yes, we need to work hard to show the results of our salvation, but this only happens because God is working in us, God gives us the desire and the power to do what pleases him. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be like Jesus because we can be with Jesus, because Jesus is here with us, at work in us, making us capable of things we could never do in a million years on our own. That's how Peter was able to lead the church and heal Aeneas and bring

life to Tabitha, not through anything he did, but because of what Jesus did through him.

And that is good news for us to hear, because it means it isn't all up to us. God has called us to be like Jesus, to be his people, his hands and feet here on the earth, but God doesn't ask us to do anything without helping us to do it. Jesus Christ is here with us, working in us and through us, guiding and blessing and strengthening us so that we're capable of more than we expect, more than we think possible. When a parent teaches their child to write, they place their hand over the child's hand and move both hands together; when a child is learning to ride a bike, the parent holds it steady as the child learns to pedal and steer. That's what our God does for us – in Jesus Christ, through his Holy Spirit at work in our lives, God guides us in what we say and do, God's heart covers our hearts, God's hands cover our hands and they move within us so that the good we do isn't just our own action, our own work, it is Jesus Christ at work in us, Jesus Christ here with us making us more and more like him. We can love like Jesus loves, because Jesus Christ is here, here with us now. We can forgive like Jesus forgave us, because Christ is here showing us what it means to forgive. Everything that Jesus did, we can do, because Jesus is alive, Jesus Christ is here, and that means there's nothing we can't accomplish when we let Christ work in us. We can be like Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ is here with us, and in the power of his Spirit, in the power of his love, we can change the world, here today and everywhere we go. In the name of Jesus Christ - Amen.

