

Rev. Janet R. Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
20th Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, October 26, 2025
Scripture: Philippians 2: 1-11
Sermon: Imitating Christ

Listen to this story, "Ragman" by Walter Wangerin, Jr.
I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing in my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Hush, child. hush now, and I will tell it to you.

Even before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our City. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear tenor voice: 'Rags!' Ah, the air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed by such sweet music.

'Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!'

'Now this is a wonder,' I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city?

I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon the ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, signing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers.

'Give me your rag,' he said gently. 'and I'll give you another.'

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then he began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

'This is a wonder,' I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery.

'Rags! Rags! New Rags for old!'

In a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek.

Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart.

'Give me your rag,' he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, 'and I'll give you mine.'

The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood -- his own!

'Rags! Rags! I take old rags!' cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman.

The sun hurt both the sky, now, and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry.

'Are you going to work?' he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head. The Ragman pressed him: 'Do you have a job?'

'Are you crazy?' sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket -- flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

'So,' said the Ragman. 'Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine.'

So much quiet authority in his voice!

The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman -- and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on, he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the Ragman had only one.

'Go to work,' he said.

After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, an old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman. Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, old, and sick, yet he went with terrible speed. On spider's legs he skittered through the alleys of the City, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I need to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so.

The little old Ragman -- he came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. And I waited to help him in what he did but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he signed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket. And he died.

Oh how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope -- because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know -- how could I know? -- that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night too.

But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence.

Light -- pure, hard, demanding light -- slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the first wonder of all. There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy! There was no sign of sorrow or age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and, trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice: 'Dress me.'

He dressed me. My Lord, he put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside him. The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!

This is a powerful story reminding us of the love that Jesus has for us. Isaiah 53: 3-6 is known as the Suffering Servant chapter. Isaiah 53 is a prophesy scripture of the coming Messiah and what was going to happen to Jesus when he died for us. Listen to Isaiah 53: 3-6 (New International Version)

3 "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

4 Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Jesus as the humble servant. Jesus came to serve and not to be served. God became flesh taking on our pains and sorrows and our struggles. God loves us so much that God came in human form to give us eternal life.

In our scripture lesson today from Philippians, Paul wanted believers to realize that they were not only to have a "single mind" "one mind" on Christ, who is our example, but to also have a submissive mind, having a servant humble mind imitating Christ's example.

"Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves."

Our scripture says in verse 7, Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness.” Jesus gave all that he had to the world to save us.

As Jesus drew his disciples into his own “self-emptying” life and ministry of obedience and service to the Father. He formed his followers into a “Self-emptying” community.

Matthew 16:25 “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Jesus wants us to imitate him in our serving and being willing to “empty ourselves” united in our servanthood of Christ.

What does it mean to be likeminded?

Likeminded here refers to the way the Philippians think. They are to have the same mindset and one that is characterized by humility. They must not think of themselves more highly than they ought. Paul says he wants the Philippians to have the same love. Paul wants the Philippians to be of one accord, this is literally to have the same soul/heart together, and the emphasis is a unity of purpose.

It is when we are empty that we become filled with the Holy Spirit and the joy of knowing and serving Christ. The church is to be conformed to Christ and not to the world. The church must stand apart from the world.

The death of Jesus was not the death of a martyr but the death of our Savior. He willingly emptied himself, willingly laid down his life for the sins of all of us.

At a religious festival in Brazil, a missionary was going from booth to booth, and he saw a sign above one booth that said, “Cheap Crosses.” He thought to himself, “that’s what many Christians are looking for these days. Cheap Crosses. Our Lord’s cross was not cheap. Why should mine be?”

“He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.”

Jesus says in John 12, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone: but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit. He that loves his life shall lose it; and he that hates his life in this world shall keep it for life eternal.”

Christ planted himself in the heart of the earth. He willingly went to the cross, not for anything he did, but for what you and I did and still do, sinning against God.

Jesus did not look only to his own interests, he looked upon the eternal well-being of us.

And if we would acquire that same mind of Christ for one another, we must first know the mind that Christ has for us.

A way to show our gratitude to God is by returning that love; and, as Paul says to us, by living our life in imitation of our loving God.

Imitation is an essential way that we learn. Scientists call this mimetic learning, learning by imitation. It makes sense that as God's children, we would learn and grow by imitating God, just as any child learns by imitating their parents.

How do we imitate God? What does that even mean? How can we imitate someone we can't even see? Obviously, God is not asking us to do the impossible, nor is Paul. And in fact, there are two very clear ways that we are offered in scripture on how to imitate God.

The first way that we can learn to imitate God is through his son. It is one of the reasons why God's son was sent to earth: To show us how to live.

His mission was not just to die for us, but also to show us how to live. We can learn so much simply by focusing on Jesus, by looking at how he approached life, and by trying to do the same. Imitate God by doing what Jesus taught. Jesus spent a lot of his time on earth teaching. Both his words and his actions show us that. Jesus came to earth for this reason, also: To teach us.

Jesus does much more than offer us a model of how to live. He also loves us. Unconditionally, and eternally.

The whole Christian life starts there and ends there. In the undying love of Jesus. He loves us. It is why he came to earth. Not just to show us how to live, and not just to die for us. But first and foremost, to love us.

May we all always have the courage and boldness to imitate Christ as we walk humbly with God.

May God give us the confidence to know that we will eventually rejoice in eternal glory as his humble servants.