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The Pattern of Christ

Joshua 3:10

One of the latest discoveries of our Westminster archivists is a newspaper clipping from 1871. The article describes the farewell sermon of the Reverend Gilbert H. Robertson. Robertson was pastor of this church during the construction of the third building located downtown at Fourth and Monroe Streets. Robertson was noted as an outstanding orator and left Springfield after four and a half years to accept a call to the largest Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. An excerpt of Robertson's concluding words was included in the article. This was a heartfelt expression of gratitude to the congregation and to Robertson's predecessor, the Reverend Albert Hale who had served the church for 27 years. He said:

The book that contains the records of these four years and more of work among you is now to be closed and sealed, to go up before God. Most pleasant pages are there interleaved! ... of those meetings of prayer when hearts flowed together in sweet fellowship; of his voice [Albert Hale] so often heard who has been ever to me more than a parent—a father—my pattern and ideal of a Christian minister and a Christian man; of the elders, everyone ever as kindly and helpful as they were wise and true, with never one ungentle word in all our counsels; of the peace and unanimity that have had scarce a ruffle in all my work among you, as delightful as they are remarkable. And in these turning pages how many deeds of your kindness to me are written, never to grow dim; of your tolerance with my faults; of your patience with my failures; of your sympathy that never wearied; ...¹

Robertson understood that the success of his ministry was due in large part the support of the congregation and what he learned from Albert Hale. When tested by the demands of ministry he knew that his best response was to follow the pattern set down by his mentor.

The same dynamic is at work in the third chapter of the Book of Joshua. Here we find Joshua adjusting to his new role as leader of the Hebrews. Moses had led the people through the wilderness. Now they are poised to enter the Promised Land, but Moses is gone. Joshua faces a difficult test as the new leader of the Hebrews. The Jordan River is flooded and there is no way for such a large group of people to cross to the other side. If Joshua cannot find a way to negotiate this last stage of the journey, his leadership will quickly collapse.

In this time of crisis, Joshua follows the pattern of his mentor Moses. Moses taught him that he must depend on God. He understands that he does not have the solution to the dilemma which faces him. The biblical writer tells us that Joshua's first priority was to listen to God and then communicate God's message to the people. This is what Moses did when he led the people through the wilderness. In the end it is God who shows Joshua the way to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. At God's command Joshua does at the Jordan River what Moses did at the Red Sea. The waters are parted so the people can cross safely to the other side. In this crossing the people come to know that God has confirmed Joshua as their leader. They learn once again that the success of their journey depends on God.

This truth is affirmed in the 23rd chapter of Matthew. Here Matthew is warning his church that there is only one pattern that can guide their spiritual journey. It is not the pattern of those who seek places of preference or look for ways to exalt themselves. Matthew points to the example of certain Jewish religious leaders who were behaving in self-serving ways. But he is addressing his message to church leaders who are doing the same thing. Matthew warns that they are following the wrong pattern. When confronted with a crisis their spiritual poverty will be exposed. The pattern of Christ makes clear that our journey is about learning the humility to place our trust in God.

On this Remembrance Sunday we celebrate that we are part of a long line of faithful people who have followed the pattern of Christ. This is the pattern that Gilbert Robertson saw in the lives of Albert Hale and the members of Second Presbyterian when he was called here in 1866. It is also the pattern that your present day ministers can clearly see in this place today. In the words of Joshua, “By this you shall know that among you is the living God... (Joshua 3:10).”

Endnotes

1. Gilbert H. Robertson, “Closing Sermon of the Rev. G. H. Robertson,” *Daily Illinois State Journal*, 1871.