



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

THE ART OF MIMICRY

January 26, 2014

Christianity

Matthew 4.23-25

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, Jerusalem, Judea and from beyond the Jordan.

Islam

Qur'an 13.11

God changes not what is in a people until they change what is in themselves.

The phrase “monkey see, monkey do” popped up in American culture in the early 1920s. In its literal sense, it refers to the way in which young animals learn to survive in the wild, watching their parents hunt for food, hide from danger and find their way in the social strata of their species. In its larger sense, it refers to the learning process that happens without any understanding of why or how things work.

In the current issue of *Scientific American* an article entitled “Our Unconscious Mind,” John Bargh points out that

people have a natural tendency to mimic and imitate the physical behavior of others—their emotional expressions, arm and hand gestures, their body postures. These impulses appear through the natural world in the fluid way that schools of fish, herds of antelope and flocks of birds coordinate group behavior so that they move almost as if they were a single organism. In humans, the tendency to spontaneously mimic and imitate what others around us are doing has been observed in very young infants and toddlers, and for nearly a century, psychologists have argued that being a copycat helps us learn language and other behaviors from our parents. (January 2014)

It is a powerful reminder of the power of observation and the imprint our actions leave on others, calling into cognition the responsibility we have as parents, grandparents, community leaders and people of faith. Our behaviors are being observed, even if we aren't aware of it, reiterating the important role we have to play in making our world a better place to live.

As Jesus went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the kingdom of God in the synagogues, it was his actions of healing that had the biggest impression on the people. Here was the kingdom of love brought down to its basic expression: people restored to wholeness, people treated as equals, people valued for who they are, people loved unconditionally. He was keenly aware of the impact his actions had, not only on those who were healed but those who observed it as well. And ultimately it was his commission to those who followed him to do the same. Jesus told his disciples later in Matthew's gospel:

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be hindered in heaven, and whatever you free on earth will be freed in heaven."

The power we have to influence the world for good or evil is an awesome commodity.

Bargh goes on to say in the article that imitation fosters a social mind-set without the need for providing an explicit road sign that instructs people in what to do next. Waiting patiently in a long line encourages others to do the same; holding a door for a companion and not littering puts others in a frame of mind to do the right thing. Unconscious imitation fosters empathetic feelings toward others, a "social glue" that creates a sense of closeness even among total strangers. The strongest form of mimicry, he says, results when two or more people engage in the same activity at the same time, like armies marching or churchgoers singing a hymn together. Research on behavioral synchrony has shown it has the effect of increasing cooperation even if the individuals involved have never met before. Such is the power of people in the kingdom of God to hinder or free.

Much in the same way, mimicry has the same effect when misdeed leads to another. Researchers placed graffiti on an alley wall, it led to an increase in littering of pamphlets that were placed nearby. Fighting graffiti and other small, nuisance infractions, it turns out, can have a large impact on improving the quality of urban life. Planting small flower gardens in neighborhoods, though small by comparison to the ugly run-down neighborhood, can have a powerful impact on peoples' attitudes and behaviors that mimic such activity.

The research also concludes that imitation does not disappear with childhood, for with what is known as the chameleon effect, we often find ourselves taking on the posture and other physical behavior of someone whom we have just engaged in conversation at a party, for example. We might unconsciously cross our legs, fold our arms or scratch our head in the same way as the person to whom we are talking. That mimicry, we're told, carries on until you decide to refresh your drink and seek out a new interlocutor whose stance and gestures you then take up, like a chameleon blending in with its environment. This is particularly helpful when we are in new situations where appropriate behavior is unknown; we pick it up by observing those around us so we don't make some major offensive faux pas.

When traveling to different parts of the world, we were often told in advance of physical gestures to avoid. That which means nothing in our culture, like crossing your legs when you sit, is a very rude gesture in other cultures, particularly in places of worship. While the one-finger salute in our culture designates a socially-unacceptable gesture, two fingers in various formations constitute the same in another culture. Out of respect for the people of that culture, it is important to mimic their behaviors so as not to offend.

All of this applies significantly when it comes to modeling helpful behavior in the context of faith. Faith is a difficult thing to describe in words; it is easier to see it in action. When children and youth, and other adults, see generous behavior demonstrated by the people whom they respect and love,

they are more likely to emulate it in their own lives. Actions speak louder than words, tis true. We can never underestimate the power and influence of our actions, not only for the recipients of our generosity but by those who are observing, if only unconsciously.

Being in church, then, could have a positive effect as a way of practicing behaviors here that could have enormous effect when we take it out there. Here is a laboratory for testing what we do in a safe environment so we can mimic this in our work place, our school, the grocery store. Waiting patiently in the Coffee Fellowship line after church teaches children by example the art of patience when they're in line at school or have to wait their turn at the park. Signing cards here for those in the hospital is not only an end unto itself; it prompts us to mimic the same behavior toward those of our own knowing, outside the church.

Great crowds followed Jesus because he demonstrated by his actions the best of God's kingdom. In those days, an illness meant God had abandoned you at best, or was punishing you at worst. Either way, you were unworthy of God, and therefore unworthy of being part of the culture. Sick people were ignored, taunted, excluded and otherwise labeled as sinners for having done something to displease God. By healing them, Jesus demonstrated a new kingdom where everyone is loved by God. Though shocking to his world, including his followers, this behavior was ultimately mimicked as those who followed him carried on in the same way after his death. Those who came after the disciples copied them, and ultimately the community of the church was brought forth to the present day. It is a holy process of 'monkey see, monkey do' by those who emulate the best of those who had gone before.

Last week at the clergy conference I attended, a trusted colleague announced to the larger group the difficult word she had received from the doctor just a few weeks ago. We were shocked; the room was hushed; no one knew what to say. The person next to me started to hum a familiar hymn tune out of his own sense of agony for our colleague. He hadn't gotten but a few notes out when the person next to him picked up the melody, adding the words. Several others heard it and joined in. Before long, the whole group was singing together in solidarity with our friend, and while it didn't change the prognosis, she said it was one of the most healing moments she'd ever known. The one who started the tune had no intention of leading a chorus; he was simply responding to his own pain. But as others copied him, it became more than an individual endeavor; as each one copied the one next to them, the whole room became a choir of hope.

Just as the great crowds followed Jesus in proclaiming the kingdom of hope by doing good deeds, so may we be holy copycats in the divine art form of mimicking those whose lives create a better world and ourselves set a good example for others to copy us. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann