

Do You Have the Look?

2/21/2016

Philippians 3:17-4:1

He was known as the "Tootsie Roll minister." The Rev. Dr. Paul R. Coleman was the founding pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Youngstown, Ohio. Except for one early appointment as an associate pastor in Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania, he spent nearly his entire career guiding the Youngstown congregation, and, when he retired in 1986, he was named "Pastor Emeritus."

He preferred, however, to be known as the Tootsie Roll minister. In fact, when he died at age 92 in 2014, his obituary mentioned that title.

He earned this moniker because he seemed to have a never-ending supply of tiny Tootsie Rolls that he handed out to nearly everyone he met. Stan Purdum, a regular contributor to Homiletics, met Coleman once at a community ministerial, and received two of the little candies from him. Reverend Coleman just plopped them right into Stan's hand.

Noticing the bemused expression on Stan's face, Rev. Coleman explained that he had given them out for so long that they now functioned as a calling card. He said that when making pastoral calls, if he found no one home, he left two Tootsie Rolls on the doorknob of the home. When the residents got home, they knew he'd been there. Seriously. For real. Not making this up.

He was right. The Tootsie Rolls = Rev. Coleman. Years later, Purdum says that Rev. Coleman is the only person he remembers from the many in attendance that day at the ministerial meeting.

Why did Rev. Coleman choose Tootsie Rolls instead of some generic wrapped candy? No one knows, and the reason died with him.

But we do know that the distinctive look of the Tootsie wrappers certainly contributed to their usefulness for him. An NPR article on design and popular culture last year pointed out that some packaging is so distinctive that it transforms what it covers from a mere consumer product to a cultural icon. The article pointed to Tootsie Roll packaging as a prime example.

"It's hard to imagine any other sweet treat residing inside the Tootsie Roll wrapper," the article said, adding that, although the candy itself is often overlooked these days, its wrapping is iconic -- from its colors to its recognizable font. Ellen Lupton, senior curator at the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, agreed, saying "It's a chewy, dark font that perfectly reflects the Tootsie Roll candy."

Besides Tootsie Rolls, the article mentioned the Coca-Cola glass bottle with its distinctive contoured shape, the Pringles can that keeps potato chips from breaking, the Jiffy Pop container that doubles as a tool for cooking the popcorn, the Jif Lemon Juice plastic squeeze bottle that's shaped like a lemon, the Kikkoman Soy Sauce bottle with the dripleless spout and the Morton Salt box with the girl under the umbrella.

What these various packages have in common (and here is the point of all this) is that each has a distinctive look that not only helps consumers quickly recognize what's inside them, but also makes them memorable.

With that in mind, think about Paul's words in verse 17 of our text: "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us."

Without reading the context, Paul's "join in imitating me" would sound conceited. But if you read what Paul wrote in verses 7-16 preceding today's pericope, it becomes clear that the imitation he seeks is for his readers to commit themselves to "press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (v. 14), just as he has done. One of our editorial consultants, Dr. Richard Pulling, put it this way: "Paul seems to be saying, 'Be imitators with me,' rather than 'Be imitators of me.'"

The next part of what Paul says in verse 17 -- "Observe those who live according to the example you have in us" -- is a way of saying that some Christians who are mature in the faith have something distinctive about them that enables those who look to them to recognize what's inside. Those people, including himself, Paul says, can be examples for other Christians to follow -- those who, perhaps, are not as mature in Christ.

It's possible to push a metaphor too far, of course. Using the idea of "packaging" to raise the idea of a Christian "look" can lead to a silly conclusion -- that committed Christians somehow appear physically different from other people.

But Henry Wingblade, a Baptist leader of the last century, gives us a better way to think about it. He said that most of the time, our commitment to Christ is not visibly obvious until something happens that causes us to act in a way that shows we are followers of Jesus.

Wingblade illustrated this by referring to a waiter carrying a covered tureen dish filled with soup. Nobody knows what is inside it unless the waiter is bumped and spills the contents. In the same way, people may not know what is inside of us until we've been "bumped" by something in life. Then, said Wingblade, if Christ is living inside of us, what spills out is the fruit of the Spirit.

The song, "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love" which emerged in the 70s as a part of the "Jesus Movement," makes the same point. But looking at some Christians who were severely "bumped" makes that point in a more focused way. Last year, after white racist Dylann Roof was arrested for shooting nine black people to death at a prayer meeting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, some of the relatives of the dead came to court to speak directly to Roof, and they told him that they forgave him.

Nadine Collier, daughter of victim Ethel Lance, was one who spoke. She said to Roof, "I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. ... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you."

At a news conference later, South Carolina Gov. Nikki R. Haley alluded to the statements the victims' families extended toward the shooter, saying, "Their expression of faith and forgiveness took our breath away." And no wonder. In that painful circumstance, those relatives of the murdered looked like the Christians they are.

But to return to the Tootsie Roll minister for a moment, let's remember that "looking like a Christian" is not something reserved for the times when life throws pounding blows at us; we also ought to have "the look" when things are routine and we are unruffled, rather than ruffled.

On the Web page containing Coleman's obituary, there's a guestbook entry from someone named Kim Husk: "What a wonderful and generous man Rev. Coleman was! I will never forget the kindness he showed me as a child in the neighborhood of Christ Church. He was always there with a friendly smile and a Tootsie Roll in his hand when he greeted me. I am blessed to have known him, and I know he is in God's loving arms."

Kindness, of course, is not a Christians-only quality, but Ms. Husk recognized the godliness of it as it was demonstrated by Coleman in some ordinary moments of life and cemented with Tootsie Rolls.

In our text, Paul urges the believers in Philippi to learn the breadth and depth of Christianity by observing Christians who "are mature" (v. 15). He's not talking about chronological age; He's talking about people who have allowed the way of Christ to so permeate their lives that they, in fact, look like Christians in the way they handle what comes at them, both the easy stuff and the hard.

Paul made this same point using letters of introduction as a metaphor when writing the Corinthians: "... and you show that you are a letter of Christ, ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:3).

And, let's be clear that Paul was not just urging his readers simply to "be nicer to everybody." In our text, he reminds his readers that their ultimate citizenship is in heaven. So he's talking about living as citizens of that kingdom right here and right now. Our lives are translations of the gospel.

British theologian Morna Hooker, writing in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, looks at Paul's "join in imitating me" phrase in verse 17. She notes that "it is possible that Paul's words should be understood as meaning 'be imitators with me' rather than 'be imitators of me,'" as Dr. Pulling mentions above. You can read her supporting reasoning and evidence in the NIB, but the upshot is that, if that wording is what Paul meant, he "would be appealing to the Philippians to join him in imitating Christ."

Hooker also notes that Paul said exactly that in 1 Corinthians 11:1, where he wrote "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

So, if we are followers of Jesus, we should look like him. If a Tootsie Roll can aid us in doing so, we have no problem with that.

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Common English Bible

Brothers and sisters, become imitators of me and watch those who live this way—you can use us as models. As I have told you many times and now say with deep sadness, many people live as enemies of the cross. Their lives end with destruction. Their god is their stomach, and they take pride in their disgrace because their thoughts focus on earthly things. Our citizenship is in heaven. We look forward to a savior that comes from there—the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform our humble bodies so that they are like his glorious body, by the power that also makes him able to subject all things to himself.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.