



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“Imitation Time”

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The Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

These verses are the text that ends this morning’s epistle lesson. The specific word from the text that I am going to hone in on this morning is the word *imitators*. But before I do, let me set the context for these verses that call for us to be imitators of God as beloved children, which in turn means that we are to live in love as Christ loved us.

The context of the verses is important because otherwise the whole lesson read today could be thought of merely as a list of do’s and don’ts: *Be angry but do not sin...do not let the sun go down on your anger...do not make room for the devil...put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving...*”

The context is this. The author is writing to a Christian community that has existed for a number of years but whose members are now feeling pressures from the outside world. After the rush of excitement of becoming Christian, the influence of the pagan culture has begun to insinuate itself into people’s lives. Corrupt teachings are in the air. Their time in history--like ours that has left us or those we know hurt, confused, frustrated, angry, needing to face choices we never thought we would have to—has them reeling. They, the Ephesians and the church in Ephesus, need to get their bearings. They need to be reoriented.

Knowing this, an early Christian leader—Paul or one who knew of Paul—wrote this letter to the Ephesians. All throughout the letter the author speaks of Christ’s love, a love that has the capacity to lead others to love with his love, thus imitating the love of God. The genius of the letter, with close reading and interpretation, is that it gives direction more than directives. It is meant to move its hearers of all ages away from old tendencies like being angry and bitter--which are especially easy to fall into when times are tough—to grasping hold to Christ-like qualities, especially love, and holding on tight.

Along with setting the text and context of the passage, let me share why I was drawn to this text that exhorts us who call ourselves Christian to be imitators of God.

To me, our society seems so uncivil. So often we aim at the lowest common denominator and barely hit even it. How often we imitate that which is cheap, tawdry, negative and expedient. We seek to follow that which gets us ahead of others. The temptation becomes greater in times such as these when we feel we are falling behind. But such behavior only leads to bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling and

slander, to use the words written to the Ephesians. What our world needs is imitators of God who recognize that God loves us. Bad behavior and asserting ourselves do not cultivate the way of life that followers of Christ are offered just for the taking. We need to imitate the best gifts God has given the world—Jesus Christ himself and his message to us.

No doubt you have heard, as have I, some version of the quotation “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” Growing up, my experience was the opposite. Several groups I participated in—particularly sports teams and social groups—had something called “Imitation Time.” Someone who thought he could get a laugh from other members of the group at someone’s expense would shout out “Imitation Time.” All activity would stop and the instigator of “Imitation Time” would proceed to mimic someone in an unflattering if not cruel way. Imitation Time was a most unsubtle way to tell a group member where he stood. The underlying message to the one made fun of—even ridiculed—was that he better change his behavior if his popularity and esteem among his peers was ever going to rise.

An imitation is a copy. When an artist creates an authentic reproduction of an original, it may be the sincerest form of flattery. But when imitation comes in the form of ridicule, cruelty, debasing others or goading people who are defenseless, then that is at least unchristian behavior if not downright sinful.

As Christians we are called to practice “Imitation Time” but with different motives from what I experienced. This form of Imitation Time should touch every sphere of our lives. It is to be driven by a set of morals and values that are in short supply in our culture and in both the public and private sectors.

Sadly, doing what others who have been imitators of God have done does not necessarily make us like them. High minded principles must be internalized before best practices can be lived out.

In his novel *A Mass for the Dead*, William Gibson writes of the time when he picked up his late mother’s gold-rimmed spectacles and her faded, dog-eared prayer book. He sat in what was once her favorite chair. He opened the book and tried to hear in those words that she must have heard. He even placed her spectacles on his own nose and tried to see what she must have seen in the book. In desperation he reached for the slender thread of her faith, once so alive, so real, so meaningful. But, Gibson writes, he did not see what she had seen; therefore he could not hear what she had heard.

How can one get beyond imitation of another’s actions and internalize that which is Christ-like about them? There is a phrase *the Imitation of Christ*--no doubt sparked by the devotional classic by the same name written by Thomas a Kempis, a 15th century monk whose a work that embodies adoration for Christ.

The phrase “the imitation of Christ” is certainly a helpful reminder that we do well to imitate Christ. After all, imitation can be a legitimate and powerful motive in human behavior. Children imitate parents—good and bad traits we all know—and students do well to imitate positive mentors. But, taking a chapter both from the Risen Christ as well as the earthly Jesus along with the Letter to the Ephesians, we realize that to imitate Christ is to imitate God, because that is what Jesus did. When the Letter to the Ephesians says “...*be imitators of God...*,” this means more than simply copying the earthly life of the greatest man who ever walked the face of the earth. It means embracing God’s love in all its fullness. It means putting away bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice and instead being kind, tenderhearted and forgiving. To imitate God means to embrace a mindset like the one quoted in the Letter to the Philippians: “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who...did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...*” (*Phil. 2: 5-7*)

When we realize we belong to God and are to imitate God, how do we go about it? It begins by building up others, by being kind, tenderhearted, forgiving. At weddings I tell couples that the only way to build a loving relationship is to realize that marriage is a series of push ups and not put downs.

Just before the author of the Letter to the Ephesians calls his readers to be kind and tenderhearted and forgiving, he addresses the issue of anger as something that can keep people from being imitators of

God. Anger, we know, is not sin in and of itself. Whether it is sinful and saving depends on our handling it, not it handling us.

We hear: "*Be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.*" Then, a couple of verses later we hear, "*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*"

Called to be imitators of God, what if we practiced the handling of our anger the way a Quaker once described to a friend what he did when provoked? Such "Imitation Time" would certainly be a positive twist on the "Imitation Time" I described earlier and help us all begin becoming more effective imitators of God.

"Friend, I will tell you," the man began. "I was naturally as hot and violent as you are. I knew that to indulge temper was sinful and imprudent. I observed that people in a passion always spoke loud...the voice is like a violin string—the greater the stress, the higher the pitch. I have therefore made it a rule never to allow my voice to rise above a certain key, and by careful observance of this rule I have, by the blessing of God, mastered my natural temper." A good practice for even the most mild-mannered of us!

As imitators of God, as beloved children, we do not have to produce the love that makes us beloved. Christian love that imitates God is not a product of what we do. It is a response to an act by God—the giving of Christ who loved us and died for us. The product of this act is called grace. It is the divine story of love and the chief actor is God. The reality is that what God wants for us to do in the drama is to respond in kind by imitating his love for us in Christ.

What all this means is that our Imitation Time is not so much a response to the well known question "*What would Jesus do?*" as it is to be a response to the question "*What would Jesus have US do?*" And that answer is imitate the love of God just as beloved children imitate the love of loving parents.

So may it be. Amen.