8-11/12/18 Rev. Amy Haines

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 Live…in Love

Think back to when you were a child. Who did you want to be like when you grew up? Who did you seek to imitate?

I can remember my sister Jen and I playing school, taking turns being the teacher. We were simply imitating our parents and aunts and uncle, even though we had not seen them in the classroom. I remember pretending to be a firefighter sliding down the pole on our outdoor play gym. After all, Dad was a volunteer firefighter. I can also remember imitating Wonder Woman and the Greatest American Hero, Amy Grant and even Paula Abdul.

Children seek to imitate those around them, be they parents, celebrities, cartoon characters or friends. Sometimes that imitation is flattering, and sometimes it points to our own blatant flaws.

There once was a newspaper cartoon called Baby Blues and one day it had Dad holding his hand over the baby’s mouth, afraid Mom will hear the baby repeating a string of foul language learned from Dad.

Then there was the young daughter who was riding with her mother in the car.

…Traffic was heavy, the weather was terrible and mom got just a bit frazzled and began commenting on the habits and flaws of all the other drivers on the road, and not favorably, either. As they pulled into their driveway, the daughter spoke up. “I have a question, Mom. When you’re driving,” she asked, “are you ever the idiot?”

--Homileticsonline.com 8-13-06 “Reinventing the Wheel”

For better or worse, children will imitate those they look up to as role models in today’s society.

And in the absence of good models, they will choose who is popular or who they think is cool.

Unfortunately, many adults never outgrow this desire to imitate the popular role models around them, never outgrowing that desire for the acceptance and approval of others

at any cost. How many adults still seek to buy specific designer or store brand labels to look like their favorite celebrity, or seek to live beyond their means in specific neighborhoods to keep up appearances, or figure if everyone else is ignoring the ethical violations at work they should too.

Today, the apostle Paul is calling us to be careful whom we imitate. He calls us to be imitators of God, following God’s ways and God’s love in the midst of everyday life.

Paul proclaims,

“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.” (5:1-2 NRSV)

We hear Paul’s call, yet how is this possible? God is perfect…and we are not. We tend more toward our sinful and selfish sides, not our sacrificial and saintly sides.

The reality is God does not expect us to be perfect. None of us will ever come close to all that God is and does. But we are called as followers of Jesus to reflect God in the midst of everyday life, to imitate God’s ways as beloved children of God, to learn to live by God’s love and grace,

God’s forgiveness and justice.

The apostle Paul reminds the church at Ephesus, and us here today, to live out our faith in practical ways as our response to the grace of God in our lives. We are not saved by what we do, yet we are called to reflect what we believe in what we say and do.

Throughout this month of August, we are pondering Paul’s words of encouragement and challenge to live in community with one another built on a foundation of love. How are we called to build up one another in love? To live in love? To give thanks in love? To move forward in love?

Keep in mind that the church in Ephesus is truly a new community comprised of former Jews and Gentiles coming together in spite of vast differences. They have entered into a new life in Christ, a new community of faith, even a new culture.

So today’s Scripture passage is more than a list of moral imperatives. Today’s passage gives these new Christians practical ways to live together in community, to be one body with one faith following one Lord, living a life worthy of their calling in Christ.

What was true long ago is still true today. Paul’s words still call us to imitate God as we live into our calling as Christians and beloved children of God, living as the community of faith in this world based in the love of God.

And God’s love is like no other. This is not the love of romantic sentimentality. This is not the love of selfish ambition. This is not even the love of family. God’s love is agape love—sacrificial, unconditional, incomparable love. This is God loving us even when we believe we are unlovable. This is the love of God that forgives sin and continues to love us even when we turn away from God.

As The Message translates verses 1-2:

“Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love.

Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.”

(5:1-2 MSG)

Love like that.

Based in this extravagant love of God, Paul offers six practical ways to imitate God and love one another in the community of faith.

1-Speak truth, not lies.

As we are connected to one another in the body of Christ, when we lie or even fudge the truth,

then essentially we are lying to ourselves. Yet when we speak the truth, we are to do so in love.

Have you ever known someone who was so blunt that they offended others when they spoke truth, for it was not done in a loving manner? Speak truth in love.

2-Be angry without sinning.

Anger is a valid response when others hurt us. And there is a place for righteous anger. Yet we are not to hold on to anger in such a way that it causes us to sin. Sinful anger wants revenge.

Sinful anger festers and damages relationships. Sinful anger desires to hurt others as you have been hurt. Sinful anger never forgets nor forgives. Anger is a human emotion, but do not hold on to anger in a sinful way.

3-Work honestly, instead of stealing.

Honest, hard work is not simply to provide for ourselves, but also to provide for those who cannot work within the community. We are to work in such a way that we have enough to share with those in need, financially or practically. Stealing damages the community through distrust. Honest work leads to care for one another.

4- Speak what is helpful, not what is harmful or foul.

Our words matter. They are not neutral. Words can build up or they can tear down. They can enhance our witness or damage our witness. Have you ever spoken something in jest, only to later realize how that jest hurt the other person? Do you remember more the compliments you have received or the put downs directed at you? Consider your words as a gift of grace to build up one another.

5-Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.

The Holy Spirit is God’s gift of God’s own presence within us. The Holy Spirit is the mark, the seal, of God’s community here on earth. When we reject the Holy Spirit within our lives,

we are rejecting God in our lives, and rejecting our place in the community of faith, the church.

Our rejection grieves God, meaning it disappoints God, even though God will still love us like a parent loving a prodigal son or daughter. This disappointment can happen through our actions, our attitudes and our words. Do not disappoint God, but be open to God’s presence in our midst through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

6-Forgive each other as thoroughly as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Our words can and will hurt one another, even within the body of Christ. So how can we let go, forgiving one another, in order to move forward in faith, in trust, in love? Paul calls us to change our attitude as we change our words. To move away from bitter, angry, backbiting slander in order to treat one another with kindness, compassion and forgiveness. In such a way we are once again imitators of God.

These practical instructions are not easy, to live in love within a diverse community of faith.

To watch our words and actions so that they build up rather than tear down. To reflect God’s ways in our ways. To love as God loves. Yet they are critical to our communal witness as God’s people in this world.

No, we will not be perfect as we strive to live in love. Yet we are called to grow in love of God and love of neighbor as long as we seek to be Christ’s followers in this world.

Kathleen Norris once shared her experience of imperfect love received in the community of faith that occurred the day she became a member of her local Presbyterian church.

..Kathleen wondered if she was making a serious mistake, since she still felt like an outsider to the church and wondered if she always would. And yet, she knew that somehow, in ways she did not yet understand, making this commitment was something that she needed to do.

Before the service, she and the other new members gathered with some of the elders of the church. (We might call them our council leaders). One elder was a man that she had never liked much, since he was a gossip and always seemed ill-tempered. The minister had asked this elder to greet the new members, and standing awkwardly before the small group he cleared his throat and mumbled, “I’d like to welcome you to the body of Christ.”

Kathleen reports that the minister’s mouth dropped open, as did hers. Neither of them had ever heard words remotely like this come from the elder’s mouth. Writes Norris, “Like distant thunder, the words made me more alert. My own small mind had just been jolted, and the world seemed larger, opened in a new way.” The elder’s words — those few, simple words of welcome — had power. They were the truth of God, reflecting off an ill-tempered elder.

“Be imitators of God,” says our Scripture today. This means to copy God’s grace and love and hospitality, even if we haven’t come close to divine perfection ourselves. When the elder said, “I’d like to welcome you to the body of Christ,” he was being an imitator of God, even though he was still an unpleasant person himself. He reflected God’s love, and it changed Kathleen Norris’ life.

-- Homileticsonline.com 8-10-03 “Tiffany Living” adapted

How do we imitate God, how do we live by the love of God with one another in the community of faith in the midst of our ordinary, everyday lives?

To whom do we need to ask forgiveness for lies or gossip or angry words that we have spoken?

In what ways do we need to become extravagant givers instead of hoarding what resources God has entrusted to us? How can we be intentionally kind toward one another? In what ways do our words and actions reflect God’s love and care in our lives?

“Therefore, be imitators of God…”

In reality, this phrase is an imperative, indicating as ongoing process. So think of Paul’s call to us today as “Keep on becoming imitators of God…”

..Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, once declared:

This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.

-Brian Peterson 8-9-15 workingpreacher.org

..The great German theologian, Karl Rahner, echoed Martin Luther when he said it's better to say that we're becoming Christians than simply being Christians. His words suggest growing into an identity rather than achieving a static goal.

--Kate Huey 7-31-09 Weekly Seeds i.ucc.org

This ongoing growth in faith is like the man who told about his Christian conversion at a Salvation Army mission. ..He had been living on the street. He said that he was drunk when he came to the mission station for a free dinner. He stayed for the service afterward and ended up "going forward" to accept Christ.

He described what happened that night as the "big turnaround." And though it doesn't often happen this way, he didn't drink again after his trip to the altar. But he also said that in many ways, his conversion was just a starting point. While he accepted that his sins had been forgiven, he was the same self-centered, profane, bigoted, uncaring person he'd been –

except that now, he was attending worship services regularly where he prayed and started listening for God. He said that he gradually realized there were things he needed to rethink, do differently, or take on if he was to continue following Jesus. There were also things that he needed to give up or, to use the vocabulary from Ephesians, to "put away." And so, little by little, he began to make those changes in how he lived and related to others.

He became a productive member of society and a solid Christian, but he never said he had "arrived." Rather, he said, he had a sense of where -- and toward Whom -- he was headed.

--“Loren Ipsum” 8-12-18 homileticsonline.com

May we keep on becoming imitators of God, becoming more like Christ in our words and actions, in our attitudes and love each and every day.

Live like that. Love like that.

May it be so. Let us pray.