9-7/8-19 Sacrificial Living Rev. Amy Haines

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

When you were a child, who would you imitate? Did you imitate the mannerisms of your parents? Did you imitate the words and actions of the cool kids, if you were not one of them yet wanted to be like them? If you loved sports, did you try and imitate your favorite sports hero? If you loved to sing, did you try and imitate your favorite singer?

In junior high I wanted to be like Amy Grant, so I tried to imitate her voice. Early on in my ministry, I tried to imitate the preaching styles of others before I found my own voice and style.

And now, with my own kids, there are times when I glimpse a younger sibling imitating an older sibling.

Sometimes, those we seek to imitate are not the best of role models. How many Hollywood couples are married then divorced within five years? How many athletes appear to be more focused on their contracts than the game they are paid to play? How many children get in trouble at school for foul language they learned at home? How many who claim faith in Christ could care less about the needs of their neighbors?

The saying goes that imitation is the highest form of flattery, yet what we imitate may not always be the best for our lives or our relationships with others. At times we may also put the one we imitate so high up on a pedestal we struggle when they aren’t perfect and fall off the pedestal. Or we look at the life of another, especially a faithful follower of Jesus, and we feel like they are so far ahead of us that we could never even begin to imitate the way they live out their faith, so we don’t even want to try.

Yet imitation is how we learn.

We learn from our families when we imitate their mannerisms, their language, their generosity or stinginess, their welcome or rejection of others.

We learn from our teachers when we imitate how to write our letters and count our numbers, how to love a certain subject or struggle with the stress of testing.

We learn from our favorite media stations when we imitate their perspectives on politics or social injustice issues or small town drama.

And we learn from one another in the church when we imitate a love of God and a love of neighbor, or we imitate an outward focus or an inward focus, or we imitate a certain understanding of scripture.

In the letters of the New Testament, the apostles regularly encouraged the early Christians to imitate the apostles as a way to learn the ways of Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:1: Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Ephesians 5:1: Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

Acts 20:35: In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’

1 Peter 2:4: As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

And from our passage today:

Hebrews 13:7: Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Today we begin a sermon series that reflects on the words of the apostles to first century Christians. What do these words still say to us today, as twenty-first century Christians?

In the 13th chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, our Scripture passage for today, the apostle calls us to imitate the faithful who have gone before us, imitating their sacrificial living.

He calls us to a way of life that is communal, not selfish; that shares power rather than demands a specific position; and that honors God through honoring those around us.

Now, this way of living is counter-cultural today. We live in a culture where individuals demand that they are right, even when they aren’t; where certain people believe they hold power over others simply because of gender, race, money, or job title; where bullying dishonors others;

and where sacrifice is viewed as rare rather than the norm.

Yet we are wired to be in relationship with one another. We are created by God to be brothers and sisters together in the family of God. As our modern society gets lonelier the more we are connected by technology, God’s word calls us back to communal living, to care for one another.

..This past week in South Carolina, as Hurricane Dorian caused many to evacuate from the coast, 6 year-old Jermaine Bell chose to take money that his family had been saving up for a trip to Disney World in order to buy food for the evacuees. He set up a stand along Highway 125 with free hot dogs, chips and water, enough for 100 evacuees. When asked why he did it, Jermaine stated, “I wanted to be generous and live to give.”

He also offered to pray for those in need. --abcnews.go.com 9-4-19

..Jermaine Washington cared for a stranger in an incredible, sacrificial way. He became a kidney donor to a woman he describes as "just a friend" from work. Occasionally they would have lunch with each other, and one day Michelle Stevens opened up about the despair of having been on the kidney donor waiting list for the past 11 months. She told Washington how depressing it was to spend three days a week, three hours a day, on a kidney dialysis machine.

She suffered chronic fatigue and blackouts and was plagued by joint pain. He could already see that she had lost her smile.

Washington recalls, "I saw my friend dying before my eyes. What was I supposed to do? Sit back and watch her die?"

Steven's mother was ineligible to donate, and her two brothers were reluctant. So Washington stepped up to donate to his friend. The tests to determine if he was a good fit, followed by the operation and five days in the hospital, they were not easy or without pain. Yet both Washington and Stevens fully recovered, and now get together almost weekly for what they call a “gratitude lunch.” And when people wonder why Washington did it, and even question his sanity, he simply says, "I prayed for it. I asked God for guidance and that's what I got."

-Courtland Milloy in *Washington Post*, quoted in *Reader's Digest*.

Sermonillustration.com:sacrifice, adapted

The first century church knew what it meant to value communal living and care for one another. As the church of Jesus expanded across the Roman Empire, the church became more diverse. Men and women worshipped together. Former Jews and former Gentiles shared a love of Jesus. Rich and poor, men of status and men who were slaves would gather as the church.

Many of the early church were rejected by their immediate families or even social communities when they became believers of Jesus. So this new church community became a new family that extended beyond blood lines.

Today, the church can still be an extended family if we take the time to get to know one another. If you are over 60, when was the last time you struck up a conversation with someone here under 18? If you have a child under 18, have you adopted any new grandparents in this congregation to love on your children? When was the last time you spent three minutes talking with someone you don’t know after service instead of talking with those you see almost every week? How open are you to learning from those whose life experience is vastly different than your own, or who is on a different place on the theological spectrum than you are? We are called to learn from and care for one another, as the family of God known as the church of Jesus.

As the early church honored one another, they honored Jesus. As they loved their neighbor, they loved their God. Yet this love was not easy. Living in sanctifying grace, growing closer to Jesus each and every day, never is easy. It is truly sacrificial living.

Thus, the apostles wrote to encourage, teach, and yes, often correct the early church in the ways they cared for one another, and the ways they followed Jesus.

Today’s passage includes the closing words of an apostle to a beloved congregation, sayings that at first seem to be disjointed from one another, yet were never meant to be a checklist of ethical living. Rather, they are reminders to continue to be in ongoing conversation concerning how to live like Jesus in all we say and do, in all our relationships one with another. This was true then and is still true today.

As someone once said,

..Real religious faith has to do with all of life and not just a fragment of it. Christianity is more than a creed to be embraced—it is a way of life to be lived. -- Stewardship publication 2-04

So today’s passage reminds us how to live for Jesus in all we say and do.

First, we are called to be grounded in love for others. Love is the foundation for all of our relationships, with friend, family and stranger alike.

We are called to mutual love with those within the family of God, the church. Like most families, we will not always agree with one another, yet we are still called to love one another.

How often have we been upset with someone else at church, and allowed that anger to divide us? How often nowadays do we allow theological labels to divide us into camps rather than remind us of the diversity of the body of Christ, in which we are all still members?

We are called to mutual love that holds us together in the family of God.

We are also called to love the strangers we encounter. Like the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18, we may never know if we are entertaining angels without knowing it. What would happen if we treated everyone we meet like an unknown angel?

The grocery clerk. Our next door neighbor. The kid down the street.

The Segway salesman that knocks on our door at strange hours.

The man that struggles with homelessness.

The woman who struggles to make ends meet while working three jobs.

How open are we to learning a lesson in faith, hope or humility from someone we’ve never met?

This foundation of love calls us to expand our compassion and care. The list is not exhaustive, yet the apostle calls us to care for those in prison. Or, as the All in Community network seeks to do in our conference, care for those reentering citizens trying to leave prison behind. We are also to care for those who are mistreated. How do we speak out against systemic injustice?

We are also to care for those who are in prisons without bars. Some residents in assisted living or those with severe health issues feel restricted in their activities or restricted by their bodies.

How do we reach out to them in practical ways? Individuals and families struggling with addiction are often chained not only by the addiction but also chained by the shame of addiction. How can we come alongside them in support rather than shame?

This foundation of love also is the bedrock for all healthy marriages. The apostle calls for honor and fidelity in marriage in the midst of a culture that didn’t honor women, instead treating them as property. While we have come a long way in valuing the worth of every person, we are still called to mutual love and honor in our marriages and in our homes.

Next the apostle reminds us to trust God and be content with what we have instead of loving money. The love of money, the constant pursuit of more, can dominate our lives. Yes, we are called to work hard, but also to be content with what we have and trust God to provide our basic necessities. Often the love that demands of us sacrificial giving is a roadblock of our faith.

Finally, we return to the call to imitate leaders who have gone before us. Who comes to mind when you picture in your mind the men and women who have taught you the faith, and whose lives of faith you would seek to imitate? How have you learned from them to honor God in all you say and do, in relationships and language and actions? In what ways did they live sacrificially, giving up their own desires for the support of others? How have you learned from them a foundation of love, respect and honor to friend, family and stranger alike? And how is your life shaping up to be one someone else may imitate as a life grounded in faith?

These closing words of an apostle to a faithful congregation are not an exhaustive checklist.

There are many more ways we could add, ways to be in loving relationship with all we encounter in the midst of everyday life. Instead this passage calls us to a way of living

that honors Jesus by honoring others, a way of living that shares Jesus’ compassion and grace through our words and actions, a way of living that sacrifices of our selfish desires in order to share with and care for others.

In all we do and think and say, we are called to offer up a continual sacrifice of praise. We are not called to praise God only when we feel like it, only when life is going well, only when we are in worship together on a Saturday night or a Sunday morning. We are called to offer God our praise continually. In our struggles and our joys. When the road of faith is smooth and straight and when the road of path is up and down and full of potholes. When loving someone else is easy, and when acting loving toward another is the hardest thing to do.

Hebrews reminds us to offer our praise through confessing with our lips our faith in Jesus, through doing good to others, and through sharing what we have with those in need.

These sacrifices of praise are what is pleasing to God.

In the first century, God was no longer looking for burnt offerings. Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, once and for all. Instead, God then and now is looking for our response to Christ’s sacrifice, through the sacrifice of our selfish desires and personally-focused actions.

Nowadays it may not be easy to admit you’re a Christian. Yet we are called to share our stories of how Jesus has made a difference in our lives. We are called to do good and share with others not to make ourselves look good, or to pat ourselves on the back, but to offer Jesus. And how often does doing a good deed or sharing with another include a sacrifice of our resources or our time?

..You may be familiar with the famous 16th century painting “Study of Praying Hands” by Albrecht Durer, but have you heard the story of sacrifice behind the artwork?

When Albrecht was young, he and his friend Franz were studying to be artists while both were working long hours at other jobs. Rather than both failing at their art studies, they decided one should work while the other attended school. Franz agreed to work as a laborer, while Albrecht pursued his art career. He promised to return the favor once he became successful.

Finally, Albrecht began to achieve fame. He returned to keep his promise to his friend but realized that the manual labor had been hard on Franz. His fingers were too bent and twisted to manipulate a paintbrush. One night, as Franz knelt in prayer, Albrecht sketched the crippled hands of the friend who had made his own success possible. This famous portrait of the hands folded in prayer is a tribute to the spirit of love and sacrifice of his friend Franz.

-*Today in the Word*, September 2003, preaching.com:sacrifice

..If you’ve ever been a student who had to miss class for whatever reason, you may relate to a student who was out of class for 10 days at the University of California, Berkley due to the flu.

During that critical absence from his organic chemistry class, a Christian classmate carefully collected all his missed lectures and assignments. The person took time from his own studies to help his friend catch up with the class.

Years later, the pre-med student, now a committed Christian, said, “You know that this just isn’t done, and I probably wouldn’t have done it, but he gave that help to me without any fanfare or complaints. I wanted to know what made this friend of mine act the way he did. I found myself asking him if I could go to church with him.”

Later Earl Palmer wrote in reflection: “I think the best tribute I ever heard concerning a Christian was the tribute spoken of this student. ‘I felt more alive when I was around this friend.’”

--taken from The Enormous Exception by Earl Palmer

Told by Andy Cook, thepastorsworkshop.com: sacrifice, adapted

How do you live in intentionally loving, sacrificial ways that honor Christ through honoring others? How do you offer praise to Christ through what you say and do? Is your life such that someone would want to imitate you as an example of faith?

As you gather around the lunch table today, share the ways your live sacrificially. Often these are the little decisions of each and every day that add up to change our lives. Give thanks for those whose faith you have sought to imitate as you claim your own faith journey. And as you go about your ordinary routines this week, be intentional to lovingly care for a friend, a family member and even a stranger. You never know in what ways you will be asked to live sacrificially that serves as a light for Christ’s love and grace.

May God breakthrough what holds us each back for living for Christ, so that our lives may speak of our faith in Jesus, God’s grace in our lives, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. May we continue to offer sacrifices of praise through all we say and do.

May it be so. Let us pray.