

"Be Imitators"

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Texts: Psalm 130 and Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

"Be imitators of God," Paul said. Another translation of the same verse says, "Follow God's example." That sounds like a good idea, does it not? Every Christian person -- every person of any faith who believes in God -- is okay with the idea that we should be more God-like. In Christian terms, it would also be right to say we want to be more Christ-like. In our Ephesians scripture for today, Paul lines out for us many things that people who want to be more Christ-like ought to do. Sounds like it isn't too hard. Or is it? I think it's a lot harder to imitate God than we might think at first glance.

For most of us, "thieves should no longer steal" seems like something we could do. Of course, that's because we aren't thieves to begin with. But other than that, Paul lays out a pretty tough list of being God-like (and even that we might want to think about...there's more to thievery than breaking

into a house and taking people's things).

In verse 25, Paul writes, "Therefore, after you have gotten rid of lying, each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor." Let's take it at face value that we've gotten rid of lying (I mean, others lie, but we don't, right?). But then he tells us to tell the truth to your neighbor. How are we doing about telling the truth to our neighbor? Does that mean we need to go next door and tell them to mow their lawn? I mean, it's true that it's too long, but is that what is going on here? I don't think so. I don't think that speak the truth means that you need to become the next Progressive Insurance commercial telling everyone exactly what's on your mind.

There are times where the truth must be told. Sometimes it is to counter a lie given somewhere else. Other times, because we care, we need to tell people things that they may not want to hear, but that are the truth. For example, after the fourth or fifth fender-bender, maybe it's time that Mom or Dad doesn't drive for their own safety as well as the safety of others. Maybe groups of people, even churches, need to be told the truth when they get off track about their mission as faith communities. Maybe

we need to tell someone we care about that we're concerned about their addiction, or other issues. It is a fine line, though, about when we should offer our truth and when it's better not to. Maybe this being God-like isn't so easy after all.

Then Paul talks about anger. He warns us not to let our anger get the best of us, and the even tougher, "don't let the sun set on your anger." Now like any scripture, we can interpret our way out of this statement and domesticate our scripture and our faith along the way. However, I think it is more honest to let the scripture work it's way inside us and trust that the truth will emerge about what we do with something like anger. For many years, I thought that I couldn't get angry. I'd do anything to avoid anger. I thought it was bad, or just plain wrong. But then I looked at scripture and I see there that Jesus did get angry. In our Old Testament, God gets angry. The prophets...why even Paul himself. So I don't think this is really about don't ever get angry. I do think it's about not letting our anger get the best of us.

The whole part about "don't let the sun go down on your anger." I

don't take it literally, but perhaps what Paul is getting at is not to let your anger fester. I don't know about you, but when I do get angry -- especially angry at myself -- I don't let it go easily. I ruminate on it. The anger wells from places sometimes unknown to me. Anger unresolved in one place can lead to destructive actions in another place. Often we transfer our anger from a righteous place of anger onto an unsuspecting, innocent other. Anger can be a powerful tool for action, but it can also be destructive and if misguided, it can cause irreparable harm. One way to think of it might be that anger is like fire. When used in the right way, it can lead to many good things. But out of control, the destruction can be massive.

"Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth." Maybe you are better at this than I am! Especially when tired, frustrated, angry, worn out, burned out, stressed and pushed to the limit, I can let foul words fly like a sailor in the middle of a big storm on the ocean. I don't just mean swear words. I mean hurtful words. Destructive words. Paul here is encouraging us to watch what we say. I think this is especially true when under stress.

"Only say what is helpful for building up community," Paul writes. Good

idea. Harder to put into practice.

"Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil," Paul writes. How are we doing with that statement?

"Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ," is the next admonition. This is the one I would like to do the most. Even if I miss the ball on the others, wouldn't it be great if I could be kind, compassionate and forgiving the way God is! Believe it or not, that is the center of this whole scripture. God knows, Christ knows, Paul knows that we will not always be Christ-like, or God-like, and that we will let our anger get the best of us and our bitterness can rise in ways that seem (and maybe are) out of control. But forgiveness, grace, mercy, those are the central tenets of our faith. We begin and end with a God who is, above all things, a God of forgiveness, redemption and the God of multiple chances.

When I read scripture, this is what I most find about our God from Genesis to Revelation. This is a God who never gives up on us, continuing

to offer to us grace and forgiveness, hoping that we might learn to offer one another (and ourselves!) the same thing. True change comes not from a place of judgment and finding every thing we have ever done wrong and throwing it in our face for eternity. Instead, true change comes from a place of knowing that we are forgiven, we are loved, and we are called to get it right more often. Perfection is not the journey of faith. Compassion, love, and forgiveness are.

At the times when Jesus should be most angry, he instead uses words like, "forgive them" and "peace" and "let the one without sin cast the first stone." It's so obvious it's a wonder we have to remind one another! Once we know we cannot lose God's love, maybe we can stop being so self-centered about our own goodness before God that we can finally do what God wants from us in the first place. In my favorite episode of M*A*S*H, Father Mulcahy reminds us that we were not sent here for awards, and pats on the back, or to be recognized. Instead, we were sent here so God could be here himself. We are called to be the presence of God in Christ in this world.

To do that, we must not get caught up in what we do wrong so much that we leave no time or energy to do what we can do right. Yes, we have to be self-reflective and work to change our ways, and this scripture is a good list of things we might consider. At the same time, we spend so much time and energy judging ourselves and others trying to determine whether or not we're worthy of God we completely forget to do the work of God so that truly God's kingdom can come on earth.

Be imitators. For sure. Begin with imitating grace, compassion, mercy and love to the best of your ability. "Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ." If we could do that much as a human race, we would go a long way to being everything God desires for us to be. If you do nothing else, work on these things. For I believe that if we work on being kind, then we might not be as angry. If we work on being compassionate, we might not be so bitter. If we work on forgiveness, maybe we wouldn't have need for shouting and slander.

Like everything in the faith journey, we do it one step at a time. It