

Ephesians 4:17-5:2
Pentecost 12B (Proper 14B)
August 12, 2018

“Imitation as the Sincerest Form of Love”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Ephesians 5:1) *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.”*

When I prepare parents for the baptism of their children, I remind them they are always teaching. Everything they do becomes a teachable moment when it comes to their children, because their children will imitate them.

I bet those of you who are parents can tell me a story or two about a time when you did something and your young child turned around, seeing Mom or Dad doing it, imitated them. Where else do the youngest among us learn things? Sometimes it’s a good thing ... like throwing the trash in the trash can, folding the laundry, or reading a book. Other times it’s like this experience I had:

I was watching my favorite football team with my son 25 years ago or so when he was about 2 years old. I had my drink by my side ... he had his drink by his side. I had my feet on the coffee table ... he had his feet on the coffee table. My hands propped up my head ... his hands propped up his head. It’s a pretty funny picture. As the game wore on it got a little intense, but there my son was ... right beside me. Suddenly, in a key moment, the quarterback threw and absolutely silly pass that was intercepted. In my much younger days ... I said one of those “bad words” about the quarterback and his decision-making ability. Instantly my 2-year old son said ... the same bad word in the same tone of voice. Needless to say, it was not one of my prouder moments and it taught me a lesson, as a parent, I was always teaching because my kids were always watching and imitating.

We've been stepping through Paul's letter to the Ephesians for several weeks now. To sum up so far, God has reminded us that we're chosen by Him, redeemed by His Son, and sealed by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enables us to believe in the One Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and brings us into God's family as His children when we're baptized into the one faith. In this faith, we believe we're saved from sin and eternal death by Jesus Christ ... through His death and resurrection ... and nothing else. But, why is that? For what reason does our Father in heaven save us from our sins? That's what He tells us in the rest of Ephesians. We respond to His love for us, expressed through His mercy and grace, through lives that imitate our Savior's life and His Word.

Paul exhorts us, **(Ephesians 5:1-2)** *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*

Paul gives us a glimpse into what imitating Christ looks like. It means walking through our lives in sacrificial, servant love ... **It means being truthful** with our neighbors in all things. **It means not letting anger** ... even righteous anger over worldly things, child and sexual abuse or racial and gender intolerance for example, and godly things, like taking God's name in vain or teaching false doctrine ... lead us into revenge, reprisal, and other sinful behaviors that give the devil a foothold in our lives. **Walking in love means living out our vocations** using our God-given knowledge, skills, and abilities to the fullest extent possible in service to other's needs. **Walking in love leads us to speak words that build others up** while eliminating gossip and other negative words from our mouths. In short, rather than allowing **(Ephesians 4:31)** *“bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander ... and malice”* to be our walk ... we replace them with tenderhearted forgiveness and kindness.

Jesus lived His life in love ... not only with His words, but He exemplified them in His walk. **Did Jesus get angry?** Certainly ... His throwing over the money changers' tables, calling the Pharisees a "brood of vipers" are just two examples of His righteous anger. But, He also offered them opportunities to repent ... inviting them to become His brother or sister by doing the will of His Father in heaven and forgiving those who did. **He built up the lowly and downtrodden** by feeding, healing, and encouraging them. Such as we hear in today's gospel, shortly after He feeds the 5000, saying, (John 6:51) *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."* **He forgave sinners of all kinds** ... prostitutes, adulterers, thieving tax collectors, and robbers.

Hanging on the cross, Paul reminds us that Jesus continued to (Ephesians 5:2) *"walk in love ... (He) loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* As He died, covered with the sins of the world, **He even forgave those who crucified Him** saying, (Luke 23:34) *"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."* All this while His best friends abandoned Him. **Then rising from the dead, He even forgave them ... in the Upper Room He made peace** with those cowering in fear behind locked doors. **Then, on the beach, He called Peter** three times to "feed my sheep" ... once for each time Peter denied Jesus just a few days before. **He forgave Paul** for spewing His murderous hatred and venom against His disciples on the Road to Damascus.

You and I, we've seen Christ at work. How do I know? Because, each day I see and hear how you, the saints of First Lutheran, are imitating Christ in any number of ways. **I see and hear you living and speaking the truth of the gospel to your neighbors** as you engage with them in your lives and bring them to worship and fellowship events. Many with us today are

here because you spoke the truth in love. **I see and hear you using your incredible talents** in many different lines of work, making the world a better place, providing for those in various kinds of need ... teaching and helping behind the scenes in schools and bible studies and Vacation Bible School and various youth groups, healing and saving lives, protecting lives and property, coaching young people, and caring for the young, the sick, and the elderly who can't care for themselves through ministries such as the church nursery, Project Echo, the Compassion Trailer, and Safe Nights. **I see you encouraging the new in faith, the weak in faith, those struggling in different ways** ... truly being the word of encouragement that builds up people who are being torn down by the world around them. Why do you do this? Because ... you have heard about Jesus ... you have been taught by His word ... in your baptism, your "new self" has been (Ephesians 4:24) "*created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*" You are imitating the Christ you believe in!

Can we imitate Jesus perfectly? Certainly not! Nobody can! We might think Moses, David, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, Thomas, Paul, and the rest could do it ... forgetting how even these heroes of the Bible disobeyed, committed adultery and murdered, abandoned Jesus at the Cross, gossiped about Him by denying Him, doubted He was God who rose from the dead, and terrorized and killed Jesus' followers. Only Jesus was sinless. We are not! **We most definitely let our anger** get the best of us at times. **There are times when we don't give our best effort** at work, school, or toward our neighbors in need every minute of every day. **We have our moments of frustration or weakness** where we might speak badly about others or fail to defend them from the taunts of others. **But, here's the difference** between our "old self" and our "new self" ... in our baptisms, our old self has been evicted by the Holy Spirit, who takes up residence in our hearts. Our new self has been created by God in the likeness of God! He enables us to

believe in His promises of forgiveness of sin and eternal life! And so, we come to our Father and ask His mercy. We confess our sins to Him ... along with Moses, David, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, Thomas, Paul, and the rest ... And He forgives us ... no matter how bad we might think our sins are. We are forgiven!

Thus forgiven, we strive to learn how our Father wants us, His children, to walk by watching our Risen Savior. By the power of the Holy Spirit we begin to imitate Him ... speaking truth, putting away anger, using our hands and sharing our gifts with others in need, building up others, and, above all, (Ephesians 4:32) *“forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven (each of us).”*

I see God’s people here at First Lutheran and hear how many of you imitate Him each day. I see how the Holy Spirit works in us to make us holy through God’s word and His sacraments. Called by our Father and redeemed by His Son; the Holy Spirit has sealed each of us as His own! We are first, foremost, and always His children by His grace. In response, we imitate our Savior in His sacrificial and servant love ... from now until the day He returns again.

We heard Jesus in our gospel today, He promises, (John 6:35) *“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”* On that day our new self will be joined together as one with God’s new and redeemed creation. We will be truly and completely and fully united with Him and with all who believe ... for eternity.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

James Kent