

Sermon

“Be Imitators of God”

August 4th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

8th Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Psalm 34:1-8 and Ephesians 4:25-5:2

SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 34:1-8

¹ I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. ² My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. ³ O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together. ⁴ I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. ⁵ Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. ⁶ This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble. ⁷ The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. ⁸ O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. [NRSV]

Ephesians 4:25—5:2

²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸ Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

^{5:1} Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Wonderful God, as we shift from hearing your Word read to hearing your Word proclaimed, overwhelm us with your Spirit of wisdom so that we may know you more fully, love you more passionately, and follow you more closely; through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray; and let all God’s people say...Amen.

The Church is the Body of Christ

“The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world.” (*Book of Order* F-1.0301) That’s how the *Book of Order* defines what we are as children of God gathered together in this place. We are the Church, and we are the body of Christ. And, that’s why we, as the “body of Christ,” are the visible presence of God in this part of the world and beyond—demonstrating God’s love and grace to whomever we can.

What Ephesians is All About?

Last week’s sermon focused heavily on *what* the apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was all about—that the first three chapters of Ephesians have laid the groundwork for why it matters to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Paul has been laying out a grand vision of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ—dealing with the great and eternal truths of our faith, along with the purpose and function of the church—the very body of Christ in the world then, now, and far from now in the future. He’s been writing about how God is at work in the world through Jesus Christ—revealing, choosing, adopting, sacrificing, and blessing persons and communities everywhere in order to bring about a new, unified body of the faithful—one that is knit together by the sacred oneness of God himself made known to the world in the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Why Is Ephesians So Important?

And, then in chapter 4, Paul pivots from the grand vision of God’s accomplishments in Christ to answering the inevitable question ... *so what?* What does any of this Jesus stuff matter anyway? Why is it so important? And, Paul paints a beautiful picture of the kind of Christ-like life that people must try to live when they enter the fellowship of the body of Christ, and he begs us to strive for the Christ-like attributes of humility, gentleness, patience, peace, and love—for these are the very things that build up the body of Christ, especially love—*agape* love—the kind of love that far exceeds any emotion we may feel because *agape* love is something that we “do” rather than something that we feel. It’s an action. It’s the kind of love that truly is the ability to retain unconquerable goodwill

towards both the unlovely and the unlovable, towards those who do not love us, and even towards those whom we do not like. Such love builds up rather than tears down. And, showing such love means loving with a sense of urgency and a lack of selfishness because that is what God and Christ do.

Of course, that's all sounds fine and dandy, but it doesn't always mean that we do it or do it well. It doesn't always mean that, as the body of Christ, we do a great job of demonstrating God's love and grace to whomever we can. After all, as with many things in life, it's one thing to understand something on a theoretical level, but it's something altogether different to be able to put it into practice. But, as Presbyterian-flavored Christians, we believe that encountering scripture changes us, and we've spent the past couple weeks encountering Paul's letter to the Ephesians. So we must ask ourselves ... *now what?* How do we live more faithfully as the body of Christ as a result of this encounter? And, how do we put all this stuff into practice?

How Does Ephesians Change Us?

Well, Paul wastes no time giving us the answer. From our reading today, chapter 5 immediately begins with a bold statement—a command really—words that rise right off the page and into our hearing: “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Ephesians 5:1-2). “Be imitators of God,” Paul says—the *only* place where this particular command is found in the New Testament. In other words, copycat God and God's character and God's actions. And, if we ever wonder just what God looks like or how God acts, or how God talks, then we should wonder no more. Because Jesus imitated God with everything he did and said, and so we must imitate and copycat Jesus Christ, who was the fullness of God in the flesh. Indeed, we are called to be imitators of Christ's actions—that's how we do this Christian thing best—we imitate Jesus. And, we imitate Jesus not just in the sanctuaries we find ourselves in on Sunday mornings, but on the front lines of daily, human interaction and relationships.

Be Imitators of God

Basically, Paul sets before Christ-following people of faith the highest

standard in all the world—that we must imitate the love and forgiveness of God—to love one another with the same sacrificial, agape love with which Jesus loved, and to forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven us. Because ultimately, as God’s beloved children, we do not just love God, praise God, worship God, and thank God. We must also aim to imitate God, doing our best to close the gap between God’s behavior in Christ and our own—for the sake of the body of Christ ... and definitely for the sake of the world. And, in so doing, we grow more and more into the likeness of Christ, which is part of our very calling as the body of Christ in the first place—as I said at the beginning, as the “body of Christ,” we are the visible presence of God in this part of the world and beyond—demonstrating God’s love and grace to whomever we can.

Look to God and Be Radiant

And, in closing, here’s another way to look at it ... our first scripture reading today was from Psalm 34, known to be a psalm of King David, and he wrote in verse 5: “Look to him, and be radiant.” (Look to God, and be radiant.) I’m always captivated by this phrase, and its suggestion that looking to God should result in something such as radiance—as in, warm, cheerful brightness. And, I think it’s fascinating to imagine how common it apparently was in the lives of faithful people some 3,000 years ago that looking to their Lord resulted in being brightened up—with their faces shining and their spirits beaming and their souls uplifted.

In our time, we do not commonly speak of our faith lives involving any measurable amount of radiance and being brightened up—not even in the best of times. We may employ other vocabulary to describe how “blessed” we may feel, but we don’t usually reach for “warm, cheerful brightness.” However, when the psalmist declares, “Look to [God], and be radiant,” the images harken back to the radiance of Moses—one of the most central figures of our faith ancestors prior to Christ. For it was Moses whose face shone with glory after he had been in the presence of God.

Are We Do a Good Job of Imitating God?

In our time, people experience the presence of God anywhere that the body

of Christ is present—visibly demonstrating God’s love and grace. And, it is our job as Christ-following people to make the faces of people all around us “radiant” with the glory of God. But, to state the obvious, I’m not Paul or Jesus, and so I don’t have all the answers. So, instead, I offer these questions for us to ponder ... Do we, as the body of Christ, shine forth light? Are we, as the body of Christ, imitating God in such ways that result in other people feeling radiant—that result in other people being brightened up, with their faces shining and their spirits beaming and their souls uplifted. And, does the world around us shine with the glory of God after being in our midst?

If we can’t immediately answer these questions with a resounding YES, then maybe we need to do a better job of copycatting Jesus, the fullness of God in the flesh. “Be imitators of God,” Paul says—love one another with the same sacrificial, *agape* love with which Jesus loved, and forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven us. That’s how we live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. And, as I said last week—it’s all that easy, and it’s all that hard. But ... we can do it!

Thanks be to God. Amen.