

## Ephesians 4:25-5:2    Imitators of God

A couple of weeks ago, our text came from Ephesians, as it does today, it was the great prayer of chapter 3 about how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. Then last week came the Old Testament story of David and Bathsheba, and the extraordinary sinfulness of the king, with murder and adultery and abuse of power to boot. This week we are back to Ephesians, another text that requires our attention because it speaks strongly about what it means to “live a life worthy of our calling in Christ.”

By the way, in the OT reading for this week, the story of David in 2 Samuel continues with the account of a revolt against the king led by his son Absalom, whose death was deeply mourned by David even though the relationship between the two was fraught with trouble. The story of David speaks of how we all live under God’s grace *and* under sin, in a world troubled by sin, at the same time.

Paul encourages the Christian to be aware of the contradiction by the use of the old self/new self idea. We wear our selves like clothing. He says, “take off the old, put on the new person . . . created to be like God in righteousness and holiness.”

## Old Self

For just a moment let us consider the old self. Since his readers (apparently) had mostly been Gentiles, he associates the old person to their familiar life among Pagans. Paul says that the believer should not live as the Gentiles (ethnos) in the futility of their thinking. He says that they are separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them because of the hardening of their hearts.

“Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.”

It is easiest to think of this “sensuality” in sexual terms, and I am sure that is part of what Paul meant, but there is surely more to it than that. Paul addresses the issues that are raised by his claim in a sequence that takes up the better part of 2 1/2 chapters of this letter, and in this he devotes one sentence to sexual immorality, while devoting the rest to other things. The reading today doesn’t cover them all but does give a summation.

Paul begins with falsehood, and then turns to anger and then slothfulness (slothfulness means laziness, unwillingness to work, pull one’s own weight). From there he proceeds to loose speech and goes on to bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, and

every from of malice. Later he writes about greed at length, and drunkenness and debauchery.

I must say a few words about speech. We live in a trash-talk world that has gotten out of hand. Our public discourse is reprehensible, and extreme, mean-spirited. Paul's insistence on being helpful, and wholesome in our speech, not obscene or foolish or coarse, is especially relevant in our times.

These are the ways of the old self, to be put off like a soiled garment at the end of the day, in order to be made new in the attitude of our minds, and to put on a new self, and Paul writes about what that means too.

## The New Self

The most striking feature of Paul's thinking is this most remarkable statement, "Be imitators of God . . ." "One is struck by the extent of the demand. Too much is not being asked, just that we be like God.

To imitate someone will over time turn into *being* like them. And that is Paul's belief and intent, that over time we might each grow up to be like God, not in power or majesty, purity and holiness, but in an attitude of mind, a life direction. So it is important for us to listen to the description of what that means.

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you. Be

imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

So, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, love, sacrifice; these are what it means to imitate God. Think about them. Listen daily to the words. Let them sink in.

There is nothing here about being smarter than anyone, or being a better athlete or musician, or being better at making money or better grades, or anything like that; honesty, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, love and sacrifice. All of these are attainable for even the most modest among us.

Yet they are also impossible without God's help. That is the silliness of the whole concept of imitating God. It is both attainable and unattainable at the same time. Take off the old . . . Put on the new . . .

## Daily

Let us not focus on the difficulty of the task, imitating God. First it is plain to see the difference between the old and the new ways. One is characterized self-focus; the other by God focus.

One is selfishness and greed, hate and anger, fear of others, who are often thought of as adversaries; the other is compassion and love and forgiveness and

sacrifice. We are meant to be challenged by that difference.

And if there is a second focus, then it must be the idea itself, of getting dressed. Getting dressed must be done daily. Putting on the new self is a continuous, intentional act that lasts throughout the course of life. If it is treated as a once-for-all-time kind of thing, we will inevitably find ourselves dressed in the sad, stained garments of the former life.

One will find it hard to separate the attempt to be a better person from the daily effort to piety. I use the term piety here because though it is an old stuffy worn out religious word, I am unhappy with the attempts to replace it. By it I mean a thoughtful, humble, reverent, thankful demeanor towards life and towards God.

Private devotion, prayer, study of scripture, worship with other believers; praise and thanksgiving, service; giving of time, energy, money, giving of the self, daily; these are the ways of nourishing the life of the spirit, of putting on the new self. And they are indispensable.

The example of David is appropriate. At his worst, when he became full of himself neglecting the pious life, he was covetous, he was an abuser of power, a murderer, an adulterer. At his best, when he lived in the daily knowledge of God's presence, he was a person, we are told, "after God's own heart."

And always remember that the imperative - be imitators of God - comes in the context of grace already given, a sacrifice already made, a love already known. We are not held to a standard we can't keep, but led onward to a life better lived, worthy of our calling in Christ, and a destiny beyond imagination.

Amen

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