

Sermon preached 12 August 2012
Center Church UCC
Hartford, Connecticut
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Ephesians 4:25-5:2

“The Imitated Life”

In today’s section of Ephesians, Paul gets practical, offering concrete instructions about how Christians should behave toward each other. That behavior is important because Paul believes God wants the church to be distinct from the rest of the world: a community that has different values, different hopes, whose members should have a different orientation to life than those who don’t know Christ. How we as Christians behave toward each other makes the body of the church itself strong and faithful, *and* is the way we show the world—and invite it to join—God’s better way.

Paul’s words are especially relevant to all of you here this morning. I know that over the past few years this congregation has experienced tumult of various sorts. But now, a new leader will be arriving soon, and on the verge of that hopeful season, today’s lesson offers perspective that can ensure your good work and faithful witness not only continues, but thrives.

And so to learn this Christian behavior, Paul says we must be “imitators of God,” that is, as God’s character is made known to us in Jesus Christ. What Jesus did, and how Jesus believed and loved, we are to copy until his ways become our own.

Learning by imitation: it’s all well and good, until you begin to realize there are many more immediate role models around us to copy, influences on our behavior that are in fierce competition with Jesus. As disciples we do indeed look to imitate Christ, but we’re not immune to other influences, that, no matter how we might resist them, subtly have their effect on us. And this morning I want to focus in particular on three behaviors Paul mentions to which our culture provides seductive alternatives, alternatives which need to be resisted if the body of Christ in this place is to be strong *and* if this community is to continue to provide a faithful witness to those beyond it. Those three behaviors have to do with work, speech, and forgiveness.

In verse 28 Paul writes, “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.” It’s interesting to note that the church of Paul’s day apparently welcomed known thieves among its membership—a reminder that perfect behavior is not an entrance requirement into this or any Christian fellowship. But our challenge is not so much to give up thieving as it is to embrace working honestly with our own hands—which we do less and less of as our society becomes more computerized and compartmentalized. All the advertising with which we are bombarded sends the clear message we are a culture which glorifies leisure and efficiency and seeks to minimize any form of manual labor. We insist on being entertained at all times, but our entertainment is mostly passive, and that makes us lazy, and perhaps even resentful of work that forces us off the couch, or is physically tiring, or gets us dirty. We’re willing to do those things

and work hard if it earns us money, but are considerably less willing to work with our hands for its own sake.

But Paul is saying that working with our hands, manual labor, craftsmanship, ordinary every day chores and tasks are not to be overlooked as activities that have real Christian, spiritual value. Martin Luther wrote, “The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays—not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.” Our simple, physical, productive labor not only pleases God when we do it well, it provides an honest and realistic alternative to our culture’s message that a fulfilled life is one where “menial” tasks are eliminated. It’s no mistake Jesus was a carpenter: he knew the value of a good day’s labor, wasn’t afraid to get dirty and tired, saw how the body God gave him could be used productively and for good.

Manual labor in our daily life matters for our personal faith, and it also matters for the faith of this community. That the teachers and insurance people and computer programmers and retirees and lawyers among you Walk against Hunger; or bang nails with Hands on Hartford, or Habitat for Humanity, or the Christian Activities Council; or cook and serve Saturday breakfasts for those who need a hot meal is powerful witness that the work of one’s hands can be as spiritually fulfilling and faith-advancing as working with one’s head. That you all get tired and dirty doing real physical work for the benefit of and on behalf of this church is a dimension of real, well-rounded discipleship I believe Paul wants you to celebrate and continue. You know who the people are among who lead this kind of labor, who have passion for it; they are your role models for discipleship that follows the gospel through the work of one’s hands.

The second behavior Paul urges us to imitate as members of the church for its building up and our own has to do with the words we choose to use: “Let no evil 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.” In some ways this might be the hardest behavior for us disciples to resist copying, because the words the world around us uses are anything but grace-giving. Whether you’re watching TV, or overhearing conversations at a store, or listening to politicians, so many of the words we hear are about putting someone or something down, being clever in making barbs. Every day I hear such cutting words exchanged between people, usually laced with casual but searing profanity.

As the church of Jesus Christ, you and I are called to recognize the power of the words we use, and then to choose to use words which make a difference for the better--- not only here among our own family, but out in the world where a truly kind word is far less seldom heard. I was having trouble with an airline ticket not long ago, and the woman behind the counter was patient and stuck with it and resolved the problem, and I was so relieved I just said, “Bless you!” And the look on her face was sheer astonishment—and then she said, “Thank you, no one has blessed me in a long time.” In how we choose our words, you and I have an amazing power to actually change lives for the better. Can you bring to mind someone in your life who always has a kind word to offer? Or who once complimented you in a way you’ve never forgotten? That is the person Paul is urging you to imitate, not just for your own sake, but because so much of this

church's health and its mission in the world rests on the words you all will choose to use day to day.

And the third behavior Paul wants the Ephesians and you and me to stick to, and which is so distinctive of the Christian way, and so counter to the way of the world, is our capacity for forgiveness. Working with our hands and choosing our words carefully are pretty straightforward instruction; forgiveness is a little more complicated. Paul writes, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." What does it mean to be forgiven? I know that if I step on your shoe at coffee hour today, or bump into you, or interrupt you, any of you are going to forgive me, but Paul is talking about something more internal, something about us deep down inside.

There is an old story from Spain that appeared more recently in a magazine about a father and a son who had become estranged. The son ran away and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read, "Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father." On Saturday, 600 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

The kind of forgiveness Christ brought into the world is the kind that all of us need, no matter how clean or tainted our scorecard might be. No matter how seemingly self-sufficient and all-together we might look and think, all of us have a perpetual need to be loved and accepted. But to be human is to make mistakes, to make bad choices some of the time, and so to carry regret, and to doubt our self-worth. Jesus healed that basic brokenness in the people he encountered with tenderhearted love, a love that didn't care about who a person was, or where they came from, or really even what they had done or left undone. Kindness that isn't based on like or dislike, on past sins or present conflicts, is the holy kind of love Jesus gave, and is exactly what Paul wants you and me to give each other.

I live in Middletown, in a house that was previously owned by a dear friend I met while serving the church there, a friend now passed on. Don was long-retired when I met him, and was the quintessential New Englander: an outdoorsman and a sportsman, with an uncanny sense for dogs and horses, a capacity to fix anything, who took delight in the food he ate, and loved to sit and mostly listen, but also to just sit. Don, Yankee he was, wasn't always expressive, but he was so kind. I knew he was mindful of me, mindful of my work and the stresses, mindful that a drive down to the shore or a piece of pie or a drink at the end of the day would do me a lot of good. Don didn't dwell on my youthful mistakes, or my misunderstanding of some piece of local history, or my occasional pouting and whining. Don cut me the slack I needed most. Simply by his accepting presence I knew he loved me. He could be a very gruff man, but Don remains one of the kindest and most tenderhearted people I have encountered in my life, and I know that in him, I was given a role model for Christian forgiveness that isn't saccharin or calculated, but sincere and practical and transforming. I still work to imitate him. Those tenderhearted people in your life—think of them, copy them, give to those around you this morning and this week as they gave to you.

Sisters and brothers, our world needs role models who embody hope and God's goodness, and that means, says Paul, you and me. As you are able to show the people beyond this place that this church family is willing to take pleasure and glorify God in the honest work of your hands, to speak kind words that bring happiness, and to offer genuine forgiveness that heals, you will more fully be the body of Christ. But to do that, you need to first continue practice those disciplines in your own private lives, and here among yourselves. You need to think of those people of faith you admire, whom you watched do good work, who spoke words of kindness to you, who loved you without reservation, and then do likewise. How disciples behave on their own and then among each other as a church family is the way we prepare to carry that good news out beyond church walls. As we are able imitate Christ by imitating those Christlike people in our own stories, so then will others imitate us, and the good news God has given can shine more brightly into this broken world.