

Imitators of God

Preached on Trinity 20
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Oct. 25, 2020
Text: Ephesians 5: 15-21

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians occurs in the middle of Chapter 5. Paul has been describing what a true imitation of God looks like, and our passage constitutes a segue into his discussion of how this imitation requires husbands and wives to treat each other. This word "imitation" can strike our ears as rather inappropriate when we are speaking of God. Isn't it presumptuous for a creature to speak in this way, as if we could begin to conform ourselves to the Divine? This is why the Greek word, *mimesis*, rightly translated as imitate, was in earlier translations softened by rendering it "follow."

But there is a different sort of push-back from our culture concerning imitation that was hardly seen in the world of the First Century, nor in much of the world today. Western cultures place a strong emphasis on the individual and his or her uniqueness and originality. Seeing these as of premier importance, a person's imitation of someone is often viewed today as a diminishment of that person, as that person not having the courage to "be himself." This can partly be explained by the river of Romanticism we float on, whose founding fathers were people like Rousseau and Emerson, and who, through the mouths of many today, exalt the sovereign individual. Now this is not to say that the individual is not to be valued. This emphasis on the worth and dignity of the individual in the West is due in no small part to Christianity, or so it can be argued.

But our contemporary embrace of this individualism has morphed into a *worship* of the individual, above whom stands no one. We see this clearly in a dominant view on morality and authority in our country. Briefly put, many people believe that there is no moral authority outside of the individual which can legitimately chasten or judge him or her. In other words, we cannot appeal to a moral order that exists independently of an individual's say so. Furthermore, any alleged authority, whether, communal, religious, scholarly, political, or scientific, has that status only if I recognize it as such.

Now this view can appear bracing and heroic: "I'm the captain of my soul" and all that. But what happens if all authority devolves to the individual? First, let's look at children. Are they really to be trusted as their own authorities? It would be difficult to argue for their capacity to be autonomous when they have such little understanding and are so dependent on caregivers. They don't have the experience, the maturity, the cognitive tools or—dare we say it—the wisdom, to make their own decisions about fairly ordinary things, let alone things that can affect their futures for years to come.

"But," someone might say, "we never said children are equipped with the ability to make serious choices right out of the womb. They need nurturing, love, security, boundaries, expectations, guidance, and practice. They have to grow into autonomous

agents.” But how do they develop that ability without competent instructors, parents, teachers, or role-models? They don’t just pick it up by merely existing. A lot has to be in place before someone can reach this vaunted autonomy. And, unfortunately, many do not grow up in an environment where such is likely. If children do not have good role-models or a community who take their growth and maturity seriously, they will get their instruction from elsewhere, be it a gang or television or social media. We are all imitators to some extent, and we will imitate what is available and we find appealing.

Furthermore, all of us, not just children, learn much of what we do by imitation. To be good at something requires, among other things, imitating someone who is better at it. It also involves interest on our part and practice, but only the rare person is self-taught with absolutely no input from anyone else. Even geniuses have to be taught some language when they are little. So much of what we like to see as “our thoughts” or “our skills” or “our beliefs” do not emerge from us as if some divine creation, but are learned through taking in the tradition, the values, and the beliefs of those who influence us. We are imitating from birth, even if we are not conscious of it. Indeed, it is safe to say that most, if not all, of the views, values, and arguments we claim to have arrived at “on our own” are not the result of our free and isolated self, but are rather the result of the mysterious combination of personality, experience, intellectual endowment, up-bringing, and environment, whether we acknowledge that or not.

As social beings we will, in myriad ways, imbibe the culture which surrounds us, just as impressionable children do. St. Paul knew this, and so was not averse to owning this truth as he states “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.” (Eph. 5: 1) As Christians, we are now God’s children. Certainly there are many other good role models; but the role-model who outweighs all of them is the Lord Himself. We are to follow his lead, patterning ourselves on Him as an apprentice does the master craftsman. Paul sets before his Christian people the highest standard in all the world; he tells them they must be imitators of God. Later Clement of Alexandria was to say daringly that the true Christian practices being God. When Paul talked of imitation he was using language which the wise men of Greece could understand. Mimesis, imitation, was a main part in the training of an orator, for instance. The teachers of rhetoric declared that the learning of oratory depended on three things: theory, imitation and practice. The main part of their training was the study and the imitation of the masters who had gone before. It is as if Paul said: "If you were to train to be an orator, you would be told to imitate the masters of speech. Since you are training in life, you must imitate the Lord of all good life."

Above all, the Christian must imitate the love and the forgiveness of God. We are to “walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Eph. 5: 2) When Paul speaks of "a fragrant offering", this goes back to a very old idea, as old as sacrifice itself. When a sacrifice was offered on an altar, the odor of the burning meat went up to heaven and the god to whom the sacrifice was offered was supposed to feast upon that odor. Such a sacrifice was especially pleasing and acceptable to the god to whom it was offered. Paul takes the old phrase which time had hallowed—it occurs almost fifty times in the Old Testament—and uses it of the sacrifice that Jesus

brought to God. The sacrifice of Jesus was well-pleasing to God, and we are to emulate that.

What was that sacrifice? It was a life of perfect obedience to God and of perfect love to men, an obedience so absolute and a love so infinite that it accepted the Cross. What Paul is saying, to put it another way, is: "Imitate God. And you can do so only by loving men with the same sacrificial love with which Jesus loved them and forgiving them in love as God has done."

Imitating God obviously involves things we are to do, but Paul points out things we are to avoid. To become ever better at something requires not only behaving in a certain way, but seeing that one does not behave in other ways. In Paul's era as in ours, the Christian idea of sexual purity was an affront to a culture who found the idea of sexual sin to be nonsense. But what we do with our bodies is not a matter of indifference to God. Even joking about intimate matters is to be avoided. Why? Because our thoughts and desires are to be pleasing to God, and entertaining sinful thoughts puts us a step closer to acting on them. All of us, young and old, are marinating in a culture that celebrates the forbidden and perverse in literature, song, and film. We become desensitized over time, and then, in our supposed autonomy and good sense, "decide" that such behavior really isn't bad, as long as no one gets hurt (in whatever way that might be determined).

As Christians, we are to be discerning and not led astray by what Paul calls "empty words." It is not entirely clear what he is speaking of here, but given the context of sexual sin, one good possibility is some form of Gnosticism. This an old and recurring constellation of beliefs that has made something of a comeback today. Gnosticism began from the contention that spirit alone is good and that matter is always evil. If that be so, it follows that only spirit is to be valued and that matter must be utterly despised. Now a man is composed of two parts, body and spirit. According to this point of view, only his spirit matters; his body is of no importance whatsoever. Therefore, some of the Gnostics went on to argue, it does not matter what a person does with his or her body. Why not satisfy its desires? Bodily and sexual license are of no importance because they are of the body and not of the spirit. This view, without many of the ancient Gnostic beliefs thrown in, is quite dominant in Western culture today. What we do with our bodies is morally neutral. The "real me" somehow swings free of my body. In even more radical versions, the view is proposed that I am not in the least determined by biology, as far as my gender expression goes. This too, is my choice, and mine alone.

Christianity meets such teaching with the contention that body and soul are a unity. God is the creator of both, and Jesus Christ forever sanctified human flesh by taking it upon Himself. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and Christianity is concerned with the salvation of the whole person, body, soul and spirit.

What Paul is discussing here is probably the least popular thing about Christianity from the standpoint of our culture, and it will probably always be. To judge anything to be a sin, especially when it comes to sexuality, is to be labeled a "hater." A loving person accepts everyone's "lifestyle," no matter what it is. This is conventional wisdom today.

Now, of course, the Christian should be kind and respectful of others, and as far as possible, live peaceably with them. But Paul is serious about whom we ally ourselves with. He speaks of God's wrath coming upon the "sons of disobedience" (Eph. 5:6). To this, he adds the warning, "Therefore do not be partakers with them" (Eph. 5:7), which could be translated as "partners." For Paul, to fail to imitate our Father in Heaven makes us partners with the "sons of disobedience" who practice the "unfruitful works of darkness" (Eph. 5:11b). Christians must "have no fellowship" with such things, or those who practice them (Eph. 5:11a). All were "once darkness" (Eph. 5:8a), but those who imitate their Father in Heaven should now "walk as children of light" (Eph. 5:8c).

Those in Christ, having left darkness now, "are light in the Lord" (Eph. 5:8b). They reject "fellowship" with the works of darkness, but rather expose them. (Eph. 5:11) The image of light is a good one. All imperfection and shamefulness are made manifest by the light. In the bazaars of the East the shops are often simply little covered enclosures with no windows. A person might wish to buy a piece of silk or an article of beaten brass. Before they buy it, they take it out to the street and hold it up to the sun, so that the light might reveal any flaws which happen to be in it. As Christians, we strive to expose every action, every decision, every motive to the light of Christ. In fact, we seek to become that light. The imitators of God expose the errors of darkness. The light exposes that which is evil. The best way to rid the world of any evil is to drag it into the light. So long as the thing is being done in secret, it goes on; but when it is taken into the light of day, its ugliness is exposed. The surest way to cleanse the depths of our own hearts and the practices of any society in which we happen to be involved, is to expose them to the light of Christ.

Christians should strive to be that pure Light that is God. Picture that little child looking up intently at his father or mother, carefully studying every move his parents make. As our reading states, he or she will "look carefully" (Eph. 5:15) how they should walk. They will "not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17). It is possible to reach this understanding, to learn our Father's will and character, through looking to His word and walking in His Spirit. Our Father in Heaven would never "be drunk with wine" (Eph. 5:18a). We should be filled with what fills Him. As we come to understand His will, we come to be "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18c). Christians "speak to one another" in song "making melody in our heart." We continually give God praise, not because He needs it, but because it allows us to share His bliss. We are looking heavenward, "giving thanks always for all things to God the Father." The imitator of God will not splinter the unity of his brothers and sisters of light through selfishness. That's what those who exalt themselves do. In their pride they build themselves little fiefdoms where their desires hold full sway. True Christians do not do this, but rather are too busy, "submitting to one another in the fear of God" (Eph. 5:21).

All people tend to imitate something, whether an image, ideal, or some fantasy which puts them at the center of things. But the person who imitates God seeks to be conformed to the character and will of God, because such a soul wants to be just like his Father in heaven. That is where our joy truly lies.

In the Name