

“Imitators of God”

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2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

Tom and I just got back from two weeks vacation on Long Beach Island with my family, in a full house with Phillipses and Givens coming and going the whole time. We were able to walk to the beach and swim in the ocean at least once a day. We took walks in the nature preserve at the end of the island, watched sunsets over the bay, and relaxed at night. It was a wonderful vacation.

Last Sunday I attended worship at a Methodist Church on the Island. And being an unknown visitor, I did a little test. During the passing of the peace I stood up and greeted the people around me, and then I just stood there to see what would happen. A few more people said “hello,” but no one said more than *one word* to me, while most of the people moved to the center aisle and talked with their friends. It lasted a long time, and after a while it felt awkward because I was standing there alone. So keep this in mind next time we pass the peace here. Don’t just say a one word of hello to a new person and then have a long conversation with your friends. We don’t want anyone to feel awkward or unwanted in this place.

Besides the passing of the peace, it was a good worship service. The choir only had four elderly ladies, but they sang a beautiful and worshipful song. And the preacher spoke God’s word to me. Still, I really missed the energy in this place when we worship together. It’s good to be back here with all of you.

Last week, while my family was hanging out at night, we ended up in an intense religious discussion. I’m not sure how it started, but one of my sisters said she thought it was “official” church teaching that Jesus is the only way to God, and if you didn’t believe that, you weren’t really a Christian, even if you were a faithful church member.

It makes me sad that people believe this, especially someone from my own family who was raised Christian, but no longer attends church. Faith is not about believing doctrines about Jesus. It’s about trusting God and actually *following* Jesus. Yes, many Christians believe that *their* way is the only way, and they are often the ones who make the most noise and get the most attention. That’s probably why my sister thinks it’s standard Christian belief. But there are many good and faithful Christians who believe there *can be* other paths to God. Christianity is not supposed to be about excluding others. It’s about being in relationship with God, with Jesus Christ as our guide and friend, our Lord and Savior. It’s about choosing a certain path, the path that Jesus walked in, and then following it, in the company of others.

The *only* people Jesus *ever* condemned were hypocritical leaders of Jesus’ own faith. Jesus showed us how to be truly human by walking in the way of mercy and truth, justice and love, and caring for all God’s people, especially those who were rejected by

others. As Christians, we may believe the way of Christ is better than other paths, at least for us. But that doesn't mean no one else can know or find God. Could the God we worship really be that rigid or narrow-minded?

We read this morning from Ephesians, Paul's appeal to the Christians in Ephesus to renounce pagan ways and live an upright life by speaking the truth, working honestly, being kind to others and forgiving. This list of virtues and vices is not unique to Christianity. It's good advice about life, similar to what we find in other religions.

Paul wrote in verse 25, "Put away falsehood and speak the truth." That's basic. Everyone knows that lying destroys trust and any kind of community.

Paul also wrote in verse 26, "Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." That's from the Hebrew scriptures, and it makes sense (Psalm 4:4). When you are angry, it's usually a sign that something is wrong. And if something is truly wrong, it's not helpful or honest to pretend otherwise. Anger is good if it helps to identify wrongs and set them right. Still, anger needs limits. Paul tells us not to hold on to our anger or obsess about it. We should not act rashly or hurt others just because we are angry. The anger itself is not a sin, but what we *do* with our anger *can* be.

Christians are often afraid to express anger. I know a young couple who were married for five years. Their church held them up as a model Christian couple, until she found out he had been cheating on her. It had *looked* like a good marriage, even to her, because they did try to be good and kind to each other. But they weren't always being real. Any good psychologist can tell you that you have to speak the truth, and sometimes you have to be angry, if you want a relationship to be real and to last. And Paul agrees.

Paul also wrote, if you are a thief, stop stealing and work honestly with your own hands – not just to stay out of trouble, but so you have something to contribute, so you can give to others in need (vs. 28). Don't speak evil of others, but use your words to build up and help people (vs. 29). Put away bitterness, wrath, slander, malice, and be kind, forgiving one another. These are all wise sayings and good rules to live by. But there are many good and wise people of other religions, or of no religion at all, who live their lives this way as well, some even better than Christians.

So, does it make any difference whether or not we are Christian, if we don't have the only possible way to God, and if we don't live better lives than others who are concerned with morality? I believe it does make a difference, and that difference has to do with love.

Paul wrote, (5:1-2) "Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us..." The word for love here is agape. Agape love is much more than the love between friends or family. And it's more than the kind of love based on romantic attraction. Agape love is a self-giving love that does not depend on the other person being lovable or worthy.

Actually we see an example of agape love in the story Karen read from 2 Samuel this morning. It's a complicated story involving rape, revenge and murder, and it goes on for seven chapters, starting in chapter 13. But it is enough to say that King David's family was falling apart quickly. David's oldest remaining son, Absalom, had seized power in Jerusalem, and David was in exile with his army, plotting an attack. Even though David knew his son Absalom wanted him dead, David still loved Absalom and wished to spare his life, asking his officers to deal gently with him. When David finally heard of Absalom's death, he grieved deeply and said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom my son, my son!"

"Would I had died instead of you!" Absalom had started a civil war against his father. He had raped his father's concubines and was trying to kill him. Yet David still loved Absalom, and wished that he could have died in his place. That's agape love, love that is willing to give our all, regardless of the worthiness of the person we love.

Now if you're a parent yourself, you probably understand how someone could feel this way. You would probably be willing to die for your child as well, maybe even if the child was not worthy. But it's harder to imagine anyone being willing to die for someone who was not family or friend, especially if that person didn't deserve it. But that's how God loves us.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans (5:7-8), "Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – although for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." It's not that Jesus had to die in order for God to love or forgive us. We hear of God's forgiveness hundreds of years before Jesus. The prophets of the Old Testament promised forgiveness and the Psalms sing of God's forgiveness: "Bless the Lord, O my soul... who forgives all your iniquity... who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy... (Psalm 103:2-4).

Still, Jesus lived out that love. He welcomed outcasts, healed the sick, preached to the poor and shared bread with the hungry. He confronted evil, suffered death, and then returned to offer forgiveness. And today, as baptized Christians, we are continually reminded of that love. We are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit and called to imitate God's love. This is what motivates our lives, God's love for us, and our own experience of forgiveness, which calls us to love and forgive others.

Does this make us better than people of other religions? No. Does it give us an inside track to heaven? Who knows? But I do know that God loves each and every one of us, and when we ourselves love others, we are imitating the character of God. That's what it means to be Christian – to welcome God's forgiveness and love in Christ, and to pass it on to others.

May we all be imitators of God, that this church may be a true reflection of God's love in Christ. Amen.