

12th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

August 23, 2009

Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

Ephesians 4:30-5:2

Pastor Paul Horn

Mimic the Model of Mercy

Forgive each other, just as Christ forgave you

30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 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 2 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.

They say that imitation is the highest form of flattery. That's not always the case for everyone. There are some folks who do not appreciate having their unique idiosyncrasies pointed out to them, even if it is in jest. Some are offended. Some people think it is truly funny. I remember the comedian Dana Carvey, who in the 1990s did a dead-on impression of then presidential candidate Ross Perot. When George H.W. Bush was elected president, Dana Carvey did a spot-on impression of him. President Bush liked the impression so much, he actually invited the comedian to the White House to perform for he and his guests.

In our lesson this morning the apostle Paul says, "Be imitators of God." Have you ever thought about what that means for you? Paul tells us, "Live a life of love." Literally, continually walk in love. Well, how do we do that? Paul says, "Be kind and compassionate, forgive each other, love one another." It means loving people who don't love you in return. It means forgiving freely when wronged, canceling the debt, sacrificing for others. That's a high standard!

Well, maybe we don't like to hear that, so we'd rather listen to the apostle Paul when he tells the Christians to "imitate me." (1Corinthians 4:16) Maybe we can do that, imitate Paul. That brings God's standard down to something more manageable. At least we could imitate another sinful human being... but even then, Paul lived an exemplary Christian life.

The apostle Peter even sought to bring God's love down to a manageable level. He asked his Teacher, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to 7 times?" Because after that seventh time I'm not forgiving him.... Jesus replied, "Not seven times, but 70 times 7!" Forgive! He didn't just say it, he set the example. He was the model of mercy.. He was patient with his disciples when they

sinned against him by not putting their trust in him. He forgave those who crucified him. He continued to reach out to the Pharisees who hated him and condemned him to death.

But you say, "I can't do that!" Why not? Is it that you have too much pride, you're too arrogant? Do you think that others ought to be bowing down to you, that they should apologize first, then you'll say sorry? Jesus says, "Forgive!" But what if they keep doing it, but what if they're not sorry? Jesus never added "but, but, but...", he said, "Forgive! cancel the debt they owe you! Love them!" But it's too hard! I can't do it! It's because you and I have too much pride, we're too stubborn... and lest any of us here think we have not harbored ill will or held a grudge... let's bring in a camera crew to capture your every word and action like they do on those reality TV shows, and at the end of the week they'll burn a DVD of it and we'll watch here in church next Sunday? I think we would not see so much of the love as the bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander and malice. We'd be embarrassed at our behavior and words and that DVD hasn't even captured our thoughts, yikes!

Be imitators of God... impossible! That's right. But it's what our holy God demands if we want to go to heaven. If you want to be exempt from his wrath and anger, if you want to escape death, if you want to bypass hell itself, if you want to be free from the debt that you owe him for failing to meet his standard, then you need to walk in love, continually. It's obvious that we have not. We have condemned ourselves...

Do you remember the story of Jesus dining at the Pharisees' home? There they are, reclining at the table, eating, and a woman walks in off the street and begins sobbing, and wets Jesus' feet with her tears, and then wipes his feet with her hair. She then takes a bottle of expensive perfume and pours the entire bottle on Jesus' feet. The disciples and Pharisees then muttered amongst themselves, "If this man was a prophet, he would know that she had lived a sinful life!" But Jesus turns to her and says, "My daughter, you are forgiven. Your faith has saved you." Why was that woman saved? Was it because of what she did to Jesus? No! She was forgiven because in faith and repentance, she looked to her Savior to forgive her and he canceled her debt, her many sins.

You and I are like that woman. Our lives are not sweet smelling. They are full of sin. Even our best works smell of death, because they are not enough to get us into heaven. However, there is a sweet smelling fragrance that floats into God's nose that causes him to forgive us, pardon our offenses and moves him to show mercy. My sisters and brothers, listen to God's Word through the apostle Paul!

"Christ loved us," the Greek word for love here is agape. Agape love is unconditional love. It is love that seeks out the individual. Although Jesus saw nothing in us that was worth loving, yet, he gave himself up for us, in our place, on our behalf. Paul in Romans says that very rarely will a man die for another man, that is, sacrifice his life so another can live. But this is what Jesus did for sinners like you and me. He showed mercy and gave himself up, he willingly handed his life over for ours...

...as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Makes us think of Old Testament sacrifices, doesn't it? Can you imagine walking into church and smelling burnt flesh and blood, and seeing the smoke and the blood all over the priests' hands and robes, all over the ground and altar? That's what the Israelites saw when they walked into the temple. But it all served a purpose. It pointed God's people to God's promise, that without the shedding of blood, without someone dying, there is no atonement for sins, there is no forgiveness. Blood must be shed.... ...for our sins of bitterness, anger, rage, slander, brawling and malice, you and I must die for those sins.. We have not met God's standard. But Christ stepped in on our behalf and said, "I will die for those sins. I will allow my blood to be spilt." And he did away with all sacrifices. He was the one sacrifice, the one offering, the One Lamb who was slaughtered, whose blood was spilled, to pay the debt we owed God. A true model of mercy, but so much more than just an example, look at what he accomplished!

Christ's death was a sweet smell in God's presence, like that full jar of perfume must have permeated the entire home. The smell of Christ's death filled the presence of heaven and God smiled because his demands had been met. As a result his anger no longer burns against you, the threat of death no longer hangs over you, he freely forgives you day after day although we daily sin against him, God's demand of perfection is no longer required because Christ met that demand and lived a perfect life of love and has given it all to you and me through our baptisms.

Now he commands you, "Walk in love. Forgive. Be kind and compassionate." When your sinful nature creeps in and says, "This is too hard!" Tell him to go away and be quiet! This is how I want to live. This is how I will live, as a baptized and forgiven child of God. I want to imitate God. I want to get rid of all of my bitterness, anger, rage, and slander.... and instead mimic the model of mercy.

We follow the model of Jesus, who told us to forgive those who hate you, forgive your enemies and those who persecute you. We will do that. He forgave those who crucified him. We also will forgive those who harbor ill will toward us, who hold grudges against us. And we'll be the ones who initiate the conversation and say, "I forgive you," or "I'm sorry for our little spat, let's work it out." Or follow the model of Joseph, whose brothers sold him as a slave, and then told their father he had died. And then when they show up in Egypt and find out he's second in command of all of Egypt, how does he treat them? By torturing them and executing them? No. He forgives them. We, too, will forgive those who harm us, who backstab us.

Or do you remember the story of the prodigal son, who asked his father for his inheritance? In that culture it was as if the son said, "Dad, I wish you were dead so I can have all your money." The father gave his son his inheritance. The young man blew it all on women and wild living. When he was flat broke, he came back home, and confessed, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you!" What did the father do? He forgave his son and said, "My son has come home. He was lost and is found." In the same way, parents, forgive your children when they sin against you. Teach them

the repentance model. When they confess show unconditional forgiveness. They may have consequences, but don't bring the sin up again.

Also, spouses, don't bring up the past faults and failures of your husband or wife. Forgive and forget about it. If you've truly forgiven them, don't bring it up again. Forgive as Christ forgave you. He has hurled your offenses into depths of the sea, never to be seen again. Mimic the model of mercy.

Comedians make lots of money mimicking other people. Do you know how they do it? They study their person of interest, they watch and listen closely and even practice in a mirror. Christ tells us to be imitators of God. We will watch and listen to our Savior, to see how he walked in love for us, how he forgave, how he gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Now we know how to walk in love and mimic the model of mercy. May the Holy Spirit grant us the strength to do it! Amen!

In His Service,

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"The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen!" 2Timothy 4:18