

## Imitators of God

**Matthew 5:43-48**

**Ephesians 4:25—5:2**

Today's reading from Ephesians is a continuation of last week's passage about living into, and maintaining, our unity in the Spirit.

Before reading this, it needs to be said that Paul sets a pretty high bar in his letters, in what he instructs for Christians and the church. And so does Jesus, as you heard in the first reading... Talk about a high bar!

Last week we heard Paul admonish God's people to live a life worthy of the gospel, with humility and patience and living the harmony way. That isn't an easy thing to do. And this morning, we'll be talking about... talking! And what we say and how we say it and how we try to build up others with our speech, rather than alternative ways of speaking that aren't helpful. That isn't easy to do under *normal* circumstances, and is even harder to do under unusual circumstances.

We will flounder and sometimes fail to speak and act with goodwill. But try we must, relying on God's grace. God is not a picky perfectionist who is quick to criticize and catch us when we mess up. God is gracious. And we can look at Jesus and Paul's admonitions as goals to strive toward, and behaviors to aspire to, not because God will punish us if we don't get it just right all the time, but

because God is good, what God desires for us and for the world is good. Here is

Ephesians 4:25 through 5:2:

<sup>25</sup>So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. (a reminder to “speak the truth in love”) <sup>26</sup>Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup>and do not make room for the devil. <sup>28</sup>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. <sup>29</sup>Let no evil talk 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. <sup>30</sup>And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption (a reference to baptism). <sup>31</sup>Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, <sup>32</sup>and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

**5**Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, <sup>2</sup>and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

This is the word of the Lord.

A woman was expanding her business and had just opened a new second location, and a friend of hers wanted to congratulate her by sending her flowers to the office of the new location. But when the flowers arrived the owner read the card and it said, “Rest in peace.” Obviously those flowers were meant to be delivered to a funeral.

The person who sent the flowers heard about it and got angry and called the florist to complain. After letting them have it, the florist said, “I’m really sorry

for the mix-up—obviously the flowers you meant to send to your friend went to the funeral, and the funeral flowers went to your friend. But consider this: somewhere there is a funeral taking place today, and they have flowers with a note saying, “Congratulations on your new location.”

So much of life is about having a right attitude and perspective, isn't it? And in a time when it feels like so many things are out of our control, we can try to focus on the things we *can* control. And one of the things we can control is: our attitude. And, how we express ourselves. This is what Victor Frankl says, following his survival of the concentration camps: “Everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

Jesus and Paul also believe that we have personal agency and we can, with some effort and help, control how we respond to people and circumstances that are frustrating, or bewildering, and feel out of control.

This morning we're talking about being imitators of God, to use Paul's words. That's a tall order! Jesus, as you heard, went so far as to say “Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.” Seriously? How the heck can anyone do that?!?!?

Well, it helps to know that the word “perfect” here is same word for “mature.” So in effect he’s saying, “Become mature in a God-like way.” In last week’s passage Paul uses that exact word when he talks about growing up in Christ and coming to “maturity in the faith.” Eugene Peterson, as always, captures this well in his Message translation of Matthew 5:48: “Grow up, and live into your God-given identity.” That’s a helpful way to look at it. Perfect, then, doesn’t mean flawless, or without mistake. It is a word that describes a process of learning and growing. For Christians, it’s growing into our God-given identity.

The good news: we do this as beloved children. And, we have all the resources at our disposal to help us—the riches of God grace, God’s Spirit strengthening us inwardly, and, we have each other, as Paul continually reminds us.

There is a lot packed in this passage. So, under the theme of being imitators of God, I’d like to focus our attention on what Paul says in verse 29 about speaking words that are useful for building up, according to need, that it they might benefit those who hear. I love Paul’s way of putting it: speak words that “give grace to those who hear.” That’s beautiful: our words giving grace to those who hear. I think that’s the centerpiece around which the other admonitions revolve. Words and speech that are edifying and grace-giving.

We've all heard the kids' adage: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." And we know that that is not true! Words can hurt, and do hurt. But words can also heal and bless. Think of the power of words: to build up, to instill courage, to give identity. Or to do the opposite.

Our society has a big problem with this right now, don't we? But it isn't unique to our time, which is an odd comfort for me. Humanity has struggled with this for ages.

Clement of Alexandria, an early church patriarch living in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, reflecting on his own culture, said: "*We have become like an old shoe: all worn out except for the tongue.*" That could've been written today.

So, Jesus calls his followers to break the cycle, and love our enemies and to bless and pray for those who are as persecutors to us, and Paul admonishes us to only say things that edify and give grace to others. They're asking us to break a pattern, and to speak and act in counter-cultural ways.

Again, these are hard sayings. And I'm with Mark Twain, who said, "It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that disturb me. It's the parts I do understand that disturb me." Because we know what is called for, and it isn't always easy to do! And, we know that we fail at these things. Which is why we need to remember that we are "dearly loved children." I love it that Paul gets

these lovely little reminders in there. They are easy to miss. He calls us saints, children, beloved. Don't miss those little reminders when you read the Bible! Because what it means is that we live and speak and act in a context of the love and grace of God.

As I read the gospels and Paul's letters about how to speak and act—and how **not** to speak and act—I read these and I wonder, were people in the early church really that mean to each other? Was there that much malice and slander and wrangling (what a cool word—to engage in a long, complicated dispute, unnecessarily)? The answer is: yes. If you have to say it...

The reason why, when we think about it, is that the people that Jesus had following him, and who comprised the early church, came from every walk of life that we could imagine. Think of Jesus' disciples, his first followers—the 12 apostles, plus the crowds. There were Jews *and* non-Jews, wealthy *and* poor, Roman officials *and* political zealots who wanted to overthrow the Roman government; there were many women (which would have been atypical; Jewish rabbis in that day didn't have women disciples, so you can imagine the men saying "*What are these women doing here??*"); there were people who had been healed of diseases and demons (who therefore were looked upon suspiciously... "*I*

*wonder what they're going to manifest next...")*, and there were people who came from the margins of society to follow Jesus.

No wonder Paul, and Jesus, consistently had to tell them to set aside their differences and their egos and their rancor, and focus on love and grace and edification. *Because... this group of people would not be a group we would put together as people who naturally are attracted to hang out with each other.*

And that group of people is called... the church! And the people who comprise the church have a common calling to follow Christ, and a common mission in the world to spread good news in word and deed, and therefore to fulfill that mission they needed to be unified.

In the New Testament we are reminded that unity is not uniformity. We're not the same, but in our differences, we find a common calling and purpose and mission. And we work to fulfill it, *together*. That's unity.

And one way to maintain unity is to work at becoming gracious and edifying with our words.

Words are important. Words can build bridges or they can build walls. And I can think of times when I have started to build a wall where I could have built a bridge through what I have said. Thank God for the gift of mercy and forgiveness! God's forgiveness of us, and the mercy and forgiveness we offer to one another.

Under the theme of being imitators of God, and trying to keep our speech and our conversations edifying, I'd like to make a couple notes on a couple lines in this passage that may have caught your attention (they caught mine!), and then look for a moment at Jesus' teaching about loving enemies.

First, Paul says "don't make room for the devil." The word he uses for "devil" here is *diabolos*. It's the main word used in the New Testament to describe their understanding of the devil, or of evil. In the ancient Greek language, *diabolos* was a word used to describe the splitting of wood. It's a great image and descriptor. The devil, in the early church's understanding, is the divider, and that's what Paul is warning against here: division. That's what the devil does, or what evil does. So, he is saying, don't give place to that which may cause division. Rather, give place to the Spirit, the great Unifier, the one who leads us in ways of harmony and peace.

Along that line, the other note I wanted to make is regarding his comment about anger because, well, that feeling is in the air these days! Paul's words here are so helpful. He says "*Be angry*, but don't sin." In other words, if you're angry, be angry. It's okay to feel that. He doesn't say "Don't be angry" or "Anger is bad." However, he says, be careful in your anger and your truth telling to make sure that it results in edification, and not division or unnecessary conflict. He uses



an old saying, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger,” which means don’t *remain* angry. Resolve things in a timely way, when possible. Get everything out in the open and on the table so it can be dealt with, constructively.

Every person deals with the feelings of anger in their own way, and those ways need to be honored—we honor our own process, and that of others. Again, as long as we don’t hurt others, and we try to channel our emotional energy for good.

These past two weeks we’ve heard Paul tell us to “Speak the truth in love.” The challenge is that there is always the precious tension between being truth tellers on the one hand, yet on the other hand being careful not to hurt another with what we say and do. We need to learn the skill of being honest, while at the same time building up and edifying. And it takes skill and lots of prayer, courage and grace to learn how to do it well. But learn it we must. Mistakes will be made; and that’s when we practice forgiveness, and reconciliation, as part of our being imitators of God. Because God is a forgiver and reconciler and harmonizer.

Jesus was a master at this. He was completely honest with people, yet somehow they felt loved and supported by him. And, we’re asked to imitate him and become like Christ, so it’s worth spending time reading the gospels and study how Jesus did this. My sense is that with Jesus it was not so much a strategy or a

skill set, as much as the heart of love he had for people. They saw it, they sensed it, they experienced it, even in his challenging words and teaching. They knew he loved them, even before he opened his mouth. So perhaps our prayer and our practice can be to ask God for a heart of love for all people, especially those who are obnoxious to us. Criticism and anger do not change anyone; love and kindness are the great change agents. As Paul says in Romans 2:4: "It's the kindness of God that leads to repentance."

Which leads to Jesus' teaching about loving enemies and praying for those who are difficult, because, well, that's what God does, as Matthew tells us.

And I'm going to let someone else do the talking here, because she says this so much better than I could. I'd like to read something for you that has been helpful to me the past couple of weeks, and I hope it might be helpful to you, even if it challenges us a little bit.

What I'm going to read was offered by a woman named Valarie Kaur on a daily meditation site a couple weeks ago. Valarie Kaur wrote a book titled *Revolutionary Love* and another one titled *See No Stranger*. She is a woman of faith who, though she doesn't quote Jesus directly, speaks to the need right now to love those who we might consider as enemies, with a kind of love that looks at

others with compassion. There is an appeal to unity here too, so it nicely combines last week's and this week's themes.

Before I read this it will help to hear one small piece of her story, because she speaks here from experience. Valarie's uncle was murdered 3 days after September 11, 2001, simply because he was wearing a turban. Someone thought he was Muslim, but he wasn't. He was Sikh, and was a victim of vengeance on the part of someone who was ignorant.

In her books she talks about the long process of coming to a place of forgiveness, and loving her enemies. And in this recent writing she speaks of our societal need for it. She says:

“What does it mean to return to a kind of wholeness where the way that we love informs what we do in the world, and what we do in the world deepens our love?”

What I want to remind us all is that, as much as we must fight for our convictions and stand for what is just, remember that all those people who voted against you are not disappearing after election day or inauguration day. We have to find a way to live together. The only way we will birth a diverse democracy is if we hold up a vision of a future that leaves no one behind, not even our worst opponents. So you might be in the position to have that conversation with the

neighbor down the street or the uncle at the family table or the teenager who doesn't want to get involved because she's too cynical. What might happen if you leave them alone? [Philosopher] Hannah Arendt says isolation breeds radicalization. You might be the person to puncture the [social media] algorithm, to sit in spaces of deep listening—and deep listening is an act of surrender. *You* risk being changed by what you hear.

We don't see those spaces modeled in the world around us. We have to create them in the spaces between us. Oftentimes it means listening over time, being in relationship. Human beings mirror each other, so if you come with daggers out, they'll come out daggers out. If you come out and you truly wonder, "Why," beneath the slogans and the soundbites, you'll hear the person's story and you'll see their wound. You'll see their grief. You'll see their anger. You might not agree with it, but I've come to understand that there are no such things as monsters in this world, only human beings who are wounded, who act out of their fear or insecurity or anger. That does not make them any less dangerous, but once we see their wound, they lose their power over us. And we get to ask ourselves: How do we want to take that information into what we do next?

I invite people to take their wounds and their opponents' wounds into spaces of re-imagination—of imagining an outcome, a policy, a relationship that

leaves no one outside of our circle of care, not even “them.” This kind of labor, this kind of revolutionary love, it’s not the sacrifice of an individual, it’s a practice of a community.

When we invite people to practice revolutionary love, we always ask, “What is your role in this season of your life?” Whatever you choose, it can be a vital practice of love, of revolutionary love. And if all of us are playing our role—not more, not less—when we are playing our role, then together we’re creating the culture shift that we so desperately need.”

I appreciate her question, “What is your role in this season of your life?” I’m going to be reflecting on that for a while. Whatever our answer is to that question, we need the revolutionary love that Valarie Kaur speaks of—which is a Jesus-love—for everyone’s’ sake.

So... may the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Where Charity and Love Prevail