

Year B, 11th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14)
August 8, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Good morning everyone. It has been kind of soggy around here lately. We had been in a significant drought, but then July came along and it's been pretty consistently wet since. I am getting good at bailing out the boat, but this has been tough on the hay growers. You need a good three dry, sunny days in a row to make hay. In the previous version of the Book of Common prayer, released in 1928, there was a prayer for rain. I always appreciated the nuance of that prayer in its petition for “moderate” rains. I am not sure what impact that has on things, but I am quite positive that in this and in most things, our intentions matter.

Speaking of intentions, the author of the letter to the Ephesians is setting a pretty high bar for our intentions: “...be imitators of God...” St. Paul is clear in other writings that we should emulate Jesus, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” things like that, but here, the bar is God. Yikes.

Now obviously Christ is God, a person of the Godhead, but that understanding of the Trinity, the Triune nature of God was not well formed when this letter was written in the first century of the common era. Our understanding of the nature of God and Jesus' earthy nature in relation to His divine nature took time to foment (if not ferment), so the author is making the assertion that we imitate God, like Jesus did. Again, yikes. Having the same mind as Jesus is one thing, imitating God in God's self is a whole other level. How are you measuring up? I'm doing so so.

Now whether or not St. Paul himself wrote this letter or an admiring protégé wrote in his name; and whether it was written to a church in Ephesus itself, or was written as a letter to circulate amongst a cluster of churches in Asia Minor as some scholars contend, is not particularly important. Sure, some pretty good PhD dissertations and a few scholarly monographs that six or eight people actually read have certainly been produced. However, contrary to academic culture that does not make something important, even if it is in a reputable journal, but this information is a little bit important to the likes of us, humble church goers in a little parish on a hill kind of near the sea in Maine as we emerge from a pandemic. This

information complexifies the scriptural record, suggests that the wisdom transmitted to us maybe comes from a larger pool than Peter, Paul, James and the Evangelists. It gives us the word of God in a slightly different voice, uses a slightly different vocabulary of faith, and offers us slightly different takes on what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. As in natural systems of all sorts, variety, diversity, a polyculture of ideas, approaches and language makes for a richer teacher and guide on the Way of Christ.

So how does the author suggest we go about imitating God? It is not “live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” We are supposed to live (or walk) in love and sacrifice ourselves in addition to imitating God as a beloved child imitates a parent, a dutiful student imitates a teacher, or a loyal athlete imitates a coach. (A translation note. When I introduce the offertory, I say “walk in love, as Christ loved us...” That’s the translation in the Revised Standard Version, which is the translation used in the Book of Common Prayer. “Live in love” is from the *New* Revised Standard Version. Details, details, details...)

Maybe you’ve heard the somewhat pithy saying, “Christianity is caught not taught.” That is a particularly Anglican vision, as we are not a particularly doctrinal form of Christianity. “Praying shapes believing,” that what we say. That is why we are so strict (or should be so strict) about how we do the Mass. This is what we have, not a list of rules, not a confession that we sign on to, we have prayer, together, common prayer, and in all of this, in the Word and the prayers and the Holy Eucharist, and in the words that brings it all together in the context of Christian Community, that is the vision of God that we are leaning towards, praising and blessing and thanking, even trying to imitate. What we do informs what we believe as much as the other way around.

This is ancient wisdom, and not just ours. What might have been the Buddha’s first recorded teaching was on this same subject. He said that we are what we eat, and we eat with our six mouths: each of our five senses, so everything we are exposed to in the world, and our imagination, our consciousness,. We can generate our own reality that we can then become. The why of this lesson is be mindful of what you expose yourself to. Hang around people with a very different moral or ethical sensibility, and you will take some of that on. Read or watch junk, super violent, exploitive sexuality, just lousy people... you will take that in and it will become part of you. What we need to do is immerse ourselves in good, wholesome community; read, watch

or listen to enriching things; surround yourself with people whose moral fabric impresses or inspires.

In this letter, we get some pretty broad spectrum guidance of specifically *how* we go about imitating God and it is given with an excellent pedagogy. For each point, we are told Don't do that. Do this. And why. That is good moral teaching, it is good parenting. How many kids will just accept "because" as a why you have to take showers or go to confirmation classes, let alone something challenging or really important? I certainly didn't. (Well I was ok with showers, but I downright refused to go to confirmation classes. Why would I give up a Sunday afternoon? No one had a good answer, a good reason why other than expectation, "because you are supposed to," so I refused. One note to the parents of this fall's up and coming confirmands, my sisters weren't allowed to refuse confirmation, they had no choice in the matter at all. They haven't been back to church since and look at me. Just saying...)

So how do we imitate God? Pseudo-Paul starts with "Put away falsehood." That is a straight forward don't do this: Don't lie. What Should we do? "Speak to truth to our neighbors." Do that. Why? Because we are members of one another. This isn't *membership*, he is not saying don't lie to other church members, he is saying don't lie to anyone because we are all members of the same body. So can we lie to ourselves? Well yes, we can and how does that work out for you?

"Be angry but do not sin." It is ok to be angry, Jesus was angry at the temple. God was angry for much of the Old Testament. Anger is fine, but if we let it simmer, if we hold on to it, ruminate on it, therein is the sin. If we do this, the devil will find room in our hearts.

Don't steal, or be a scoundrel. Do labor honestly. Why? "...so as to have something to share for the needy." That is some higher order reasoning to aspire to.

"Let no evil talk come out of your mouth..." Gossips beware! Only speak of things that build up, that are constructive. Why? So that grace may be given. (Grace, a transfer of grace is an end in and of itself).

"Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice..." Those are all things in our human nature to feel. We have our instincts, our base human nature. But following Jesus, (or trying to), adhering to a religion, these are things we can do to help us transcend our nature, surpass it. So our rather than stew in our own bad feelings and frustrations, we are told to "be kind to one another. Tenderhearted,

forgiving one another...” Why? This reasoning is very quid pro quo: because God in Christ has forgiven us. We need to pass that stuff on, pay it forward.

We are also told not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” It doesn’t follow the same formula as the others, but it is some pretty sound advice. Biting the hand that feeds (or redeems us) seems a bad idea.

I love how one of the commentators I reference brings this all together. There is, they write, a “relationship between the indicative of the gospel and the imperative of human response. In this passage the two interweave in such a way as to make separating them virtually impossible. God’s action in Jesus Christ demands certain behaviors... but along with the demands come the gifts that make the demand feasible: ‘membership’, the seal of the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of God, the love of Christ.” This is all about making God’s nature our nature.

Human nature though, even yours, can be tricky. We love, forgive, nurture, help, are loyal... every manner of virtue resides naturally in the human heart. Naturally, yes, but conditionally. Do you offer forgiveness in the same manner to the lousy driver you encounter as you do to your children? Are you as honest (in letter and spirit) with the IRS as you are your priest? (That might be a trick question). Loving those who love you is not a feat, even the Pharisees do the same, right? What the teaching we have discussed today truly does is to give us tools to overcome our human nature, to take the instincts of violence, hatred, greed, protecting our own interests and gives us means to direct our higher nature, our aspirational nature, our religious nature, our Christ nature. In this we can mold ourselves into the form of the God we wish to worship, or as we read today, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

AMEN