

26 September 2021
Ephesians 4:17-5:2
Growing Up as
Imitators of God
First Mennonite Church

As it's been a couple of weeks since my last sermon on Ephesians, I'll briefly summarize the previous chapters. In chapters 1-3, Paul explores the history of the gospel, how God's plan had been

hidden but is now revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The centrepiece of God's strategic plan, the goal towards which God is taking all of creation and history, *is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth* (Ephesians 1:10).

As I've said many times already, **all things** is the Greek way of saying **everything**—everything in the cosmos will be gathered up by God, reconciled and restored to how God intended it.

That's the goal. The first sign God's goal being fulfilled is in the creation of a multi-ethnic community of followers. And this community, made up of ordinary people, like you and me, have been given the task of carrying out God's plan.

That's a summary of chapters 1-3. Here in the second half of Ephesians, chapters 4-6, Paul changes gears to focus on nitty-gritty, practical instruction on how we are to live out the gospel in our neighbourhoods, communities, and families.

Imitators

of God

Ephesians 5:1



Today's reading contains two stark and contrasting ways of living—one way of living will lead to ruin and the other way will lead to life. The way of ruin is summed up in the phrase, "you must no longer live as the Gentiles live", while the way of life is summed up with "be imitators of God and live in love as Christ loved you." Two contrasting

ways of living. Two contrasting directions—one to ruin and the other one to life.

As you know, Ephesians was a letter, written to the Church in Ephesus. And the purpose of the letter was that it was to be read out loud in its entirety to the gathered body of believers. One of the dangers of picking and lifting a few verses from this letter each week is the ease with which we can jump too simple moralistic statements about what we should and should not do—don't be bitter, don't be angry, don't wrangle, etc, etc.



As a preacher, I need to be aware of not coming across with simple moralistic statements, simple dos and don'ts. After all, when someone says, **“don't preach at me,”** we know what the person means—stop scolding, belittling, berating. The church has a long history of preachers berating and scolding the congregation: don't smoke, don't cheat on your income tax, don't talk dirty, don't get angry with one another, and so on and so forth.

In one way or another, you've heard this line before in sermons: try hard to act like Christians so that you are Christians. In fact, most people think that this is the purpose of a sermon—to give you instruction on how you're supposed to shape up so that you can become Christians.

The trouble with this line, as reasonable as it may sound, is that it gets the whole thing turned around. It is the reverse in today's scripture reading. In this passage from Ephesians, the writer urges the readers to do many good things and avoid doing the bad things.

Don't live like the gentiles. Put away your former way of life, your old self corrupted and deluded by its lusts. . . Put away falsehood. . .

It urges people to do good things. "Be angry, but do not sin . . . don't make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing . . . let no evil talk come out of your mouths . . . Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander...."

I think I'm guilty of producing sermons like this sometimes. Don't do this. Do that. Isn't this what a sermon, the church is supposed to be about? Don't do this. Do that.

Take a closer look. Paul doesn't tell these Ephesian Christians to do all these good

things in order **to be** good Christians, but rather he tells them to do all these things because **they are** Christians. There's a mountain of difference. Paul urges them to do good things **not to become** Christian, but because **they are** Christian. He doesn't say to them, "you pagans ought to do this and that so you can be good enough for God." Paul says, "Do these good things because you **already are** part of God's family."

The text doesn't say, "You ought to act like somebody". It says, "You are somebody, so act like it!" You are somebody. You are the ones whom God has loved, the ones for whom Christ has died. You are no longer aliens, strangers, homeless, wayward nobodies; You are nothing less than royalty.

1 Peter 2:10 puts it this way:

But you (FMC) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

A chosen race? A royal priesthood? A holy nation? God's own people? You and I are saints. Because of God's infinite grace, our status, our identity has been changed. We are part of the new world God is reconciling and restoring. Now, let's grow into who we are.

I aspire to live out this gospel everyday, desire to convey this message in my sermons. The last thing that I want is to sound preachy and moralistic. Alas, I sometimes get it wrong, implying that people better shape up so as to make the grade with God, rather than announcing that they have already made the grade.

Here are a few other ways of what I'm trying to say:

- We love others because Christ first loved us.
- We forgive one another because God in Christ has forgiven us.
- We share what we have with others because God has showered us with incredible abundance.

Our ethics and behaviour are simply responses to what God has done, is doing, and will do for us and the world.

I'm the first one to admit how hard it is being a disciple, a Christian. It's hard to do good things, act well towards others, and live together in love in the church. But the difficulty of the Christian life arises not because we're nobodies trying to be somebodies; the difficulty is that we are already a holy nation, God's royal priesthood, God's own children, and we're trying, as all good children do, to imitate our divine parent as we grow up, become spiritually mature.

I believe that explains the rather outrageous call, within today's scripture, for us to be "imitators of God." The Greek word for imitators is *mimétés* (mim-ay-tace), and this is where we get the word, mimic from. Not only does Paul urge us to speak the truth, not sin through anger, give up stealing, let no evil talk come out of our mouths, and put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, and slander, but he tops it all off by urging us to imitate God! Is Paul foolish for suggesting that we imitate God?

After all, this command to imitate God raises many questions. Perhaps the most obvious question is: How? How should we imitate God? What does it mean in practice?

There are plenty of ways we cannot or should not imitate God. **First**, we cannot create things out of nothing (though we can take God's creation and make new things from it). **Second**, we cannot know everything (though we can know many things because God created us with this capacity). **Finally**, one reason this specific command to imitate God is rarely used in the Bible is no doubt related to the deference, reverence, and respect shown to God in the Bible. Do you remember what the sin of the very first humans was? It was to be "like God" (Gen. 3:5).

Though there are cautionary tales against imitating God, there are also plenty of ways we can imitate God. Even though the Bible reveres God, there is the implicit call to imitate God in the Holiness Code of Leviticus 19:2: "*You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*" This idea finds a striking echo in the Sermon on the Mount: "*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matt. 5:48).

It would be impossible, if not downright foolish, for us to try to imitate the love, the forgiveness, the grace of God in our ordinary lives were not that we happen to be—through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—the loved, forgiven, graced children of God.

And so we are. In a world of hate, we are able to love because we have been loved. In a world of division, we're a united body because God has created us to be a new



human, forged enemies into the bond of peace. We can forgive because we have been forgiven. We can love because God first loved us.

Yesterday, I along with Vicki and Debby, participated in the MCCS AGM. It wasn't an in-person meeting but was held online. One theme that came up again and again from different

people was how the work that MCC does here in SK and around the world was **simply a response to all that God has done for us.**

Dan Siebert, the MCCS Board Chair, shared a story about why he was involved in a MCC project called Grow Hope. Before I tell you what he said, I'll tell you a bit about the project itself. The project invites generous farmers in Saskatchewan to donate land to grow a crop for Grow Hope Saskatchewan. People are invited to sponsor the growth of a crop with a donation to help cover the input costs. After harvest, farmers sell the crop and donate the proceeds to Canadian Food Grains Bank. The Government of Canada matches funds up to 4:1. Grow Hope's lofty goal is to help end global hunger around the world.

How it works.

Sponsor an acre of Saskatchewan farmland for

\$300



After harvest, your acre will be worth as much as

\$500



That money will be matched by the government, which means that the \$300 you donated will turn into as much as

\$2,500



Carol and Dan Siebert

Dan Siebert said the reason he got involved in the Grow Hope project, wasn't just because he was a farmer and had an interest in farming, which he does, but because he realized how God had so richly blessed him, and as a result, he wanted to share what he had been given with others.

This rationale for why people were involved in the ministry of MCC came through in the report on refugees all the way to the financial report. The basic message was, God has so richly blessed us; we want to share our abundance with others. We love others because God first loved us.

Let us be imitators of God.

Several months ago, a friend of mine got his second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine. After receiving it he shared this on social media:



“I’m keenly aware that I’ve been unduly privileged throughout this pandemic, vocationally, locationally, medically, even socially, and surely other ways. That does not diminish my deep gratitude for this scientific wonder, that protects others and me.”

And if that wasn’t enough, he went on to ask this question: “Now, where is the box on my federal taxes from where I can voluntarily add to my taxes, to grow Canada’s vaccination donations to others in need?”

Given all the division around the Covid vaccine and pandemic restrictions lies some amnesia about how incredibly privileged we are in this country to have a robust health care system with skilled and caring doctors and nurses. This is a profound gift that isn’t available to much of the rest of the world.

When I lived in China, I was privileged to meet, get to know, and rub shoulders with wealthy businesspeople and CEO types on one end of the financial wealth spectrum, and Chinese peasants, poor farmers at the other end. Sometimes within the same week I went from living in the first world to living in the third world! Spending time in both worlds sensitized me to the tremendous gaps of wealth and privilege that exist in our world. Again and again, I experienced generosity and grace from people at both ends of the spectrum. And what I learned from these experiences is how God has so richly blessed and been generous to me; can I, in some small way, respond by sharing what God has given me with others?

So here's my word to you this day from the letter of Ephesians: be imitators of God. That is, be the forgiven, loved, adopted, cherished called people that you are.

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