

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 9, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Be Imitators of God

My last two sermons have focused on two questions: “Who is this Jesus?” and “What are our motivations for following Jesus?” Both of those sermons were based on the Gospel of John. This week I have turned to “The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians”. In this letter the author of Ephesians challenges the church in Ephesus, and us today, to consider what difference our decision to follow Jesus makes in our lives? Do we honestly seek to be “Imitators of God”? How would our lives look if we were truly converted by the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus to live as Jesus lived and to imitate the understanding of God we have received from Jesus? The letter also helps us ask the question, “Are we living a transformed life in this faith community?”

Let us now turn to a deeper understanding of our text today from Ephesians. Even though the book of Ephesians is referred to as “The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians”, most Biblical scholars believe that this letter was written around 90 AD, a generation or two after Paul’s death.

According to Marcus Borg in his book Evolution of the Word, The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written, Ephesians “...was written in the typical form of a Pauline letter and echoes some important themes...it also differs in a number of ways.”¹

Borg continues, “We are not even certain that it was written to Ephesus.” He suggests that: “‘in Ephesus’ in verse 1...was added later. The rest of the letter contains features that suggests it was not addressed to a specific Christ-community. In Ephesians...the use of the Greek word for ‘church’ refers to ‘the church’ in general, the ‘household of God,’ what is often called ‘the church universal’... (Ephesians) seems to be a ‘general’ or ‘circular’ letter meant to be read and heard within many Christian communities.”²

By knowing this historical context, I believe we are helped in placing today’s text in the context of the later development of the church rather than the closer proximity to the time of Jesus when Paul lived and wrote many of his other letters. Those letters were addressed to specific churches and to the specific situations in those churches as understood by Paul. The author of Ephesians is writing to faith communities in general who have already experienced conversion to Jesus and who may have been living within their faith communities for a generation or two.

Ephesians Chapter 5 verse 1, call us to “Be imitators of God”. How did the early Christians live their lives as imitators of God? How might we do so? The author of Ephesians says: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.” (Ephesians 5: 1-2a.) We can imitate God primarily by seeing ourselves as beloved children of God. When we see ourselves as beloved children of God, we can live in love even as Christ loved us.

¹ Evolution of the Word, The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written by Marcus J. Borg, Harper One, New York, New York 10022 © 2012.

² Ibid

On Friday of this past week, I was privileged to preach the homily for June Griffin's Memorial Service. I concluded with these words: "...if there was one word that comes to my mind after knowing June for just a brief time and hearing about her life, that word is Beloved... The dictionary definition of beloved when used as an adjective is "dearly loved"... June Griffin was dearly loved... Thanks be to God for our beloved June Griffin." I do believe that, in many ways, June's ability to be beloved by so many could be attributed to her early faith and her understanding that she was beloved by God.

Biblical commentator, Kate Matthews history, whose introduction to this text was read this morning, adds this insight: "...this Letter to the Ephesians holds us to an "imitation of God" in terms that challenge us not to power over but power within – the power of love and truth and gentleness, the power of kindness and humility.³ If the call to be imitators of God could only be lived out as with such ease and clarity. The church universal, throughout history, has tended too often to seek power over others and often failed to love as Christ loved us.

Christians in these early faith communities claim to be living a faithful life. However, the author appears, in today's text, to address the challenges early Christians had in both walking the path of Jesus and in being in community. Christians in those early times and Christians today, may have difficulty with always speaking the truth; with keeping our anger in check; with stealing, or if not actually stealing, maybe our challenge is with just being greedy or taking advantage of our privileged status based on race or gender or economics; or finally, with gossiping or speaking ill of others.

In the Biblical adaptation written by Eugene Peterson known as "The Message", verses 25 – 28 read this way: "What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself. Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life. Did you used to make ends meet by stealing? Well, no more! Get an honest job so that you can help others who can't work. Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift."⁴

Today, we are in the midst of the process of sharing our memories related to the history of this church – both joys and challenges. I have met with at least ten of you in one-on-ones sessions and we met as a group last Wednesday evening and will meet again following this service. I have been fortunate to hear many stories about times that this faith community has lived its faith through sharing love; times when this faith community has given service to those in need; and times when this faith community has promoted justice for those who have been oppressed such as in our declaration to be Open and Affirming. It is a blessing to hear the joys that so many of you have experienced for so many wonderful and faith-filled years.

I have also been fortunate to listen to many of you as you have spoken truth about some of the challenges and conflicts that have been experienced in this faith community in the past. At this

³ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_august_9_2015

⁴ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+4%3A+25+-+5%3A2&version=MSG>

point, we have mostly identified the challenges and conflicts as we seek to come to terms with our history. In the coming months many of you will be invited to go deeper into these times. We will seek to bring reconciliation to past challenges. We will seek to give expression to our anger if need be. Today's text speaking about anger may be of great meaning and benefit for us. It is my hope that we can all speak our truth and, in the words from The Message, "Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry."

Kathleen Matthews (Huey) offers us more guidance. She says, *"If God has been generous and forgiving to us, how can we who belong to God be anything but generous and forgiving, anything but kind to one another? Yes, we're human, and anger is part of the human experience. The writer of Ephesians has sense enough to recognize that, but urges us to resist acting out of anger, a struggle that is clearly an ancient one for humans."*⁵

We often hold anger as a negative emotion. However, we know that anger can sometimes be justified when someone has been abused, or when we observe injustice in the world. Anger is also a useful and positive emotion when we understand that it is a necessary stage in the grieving process.

I have also cherished a Buddhist teaching about anger. Buddha said, "Holding on to anger is like holding on to a hot coal with the intent to throw it at someone. However, the person holding on is the one who gets burnt."⁶

In yesterday's UCC Daily Devotional, UCC minister Kenneth L. Samuel wrote a devotion titled "Sacred Spaces". He writes, *"Sacred sites are preserved and revered because they help us to feel closer to God, and yet...we can be no closer to God than the values we uphold in our everyday lives."*⁷ He affirms values similar to those of our text with these words: *"Real holiness is determined by the honesty of our relationships, by the justice we promote in our communities, by the respect we express for others and by using our financial blessings to help those in need."*⁸

Thus may our lives be lived in sacred spaces. May we remember to covenant each day to be imitators of God by living in love in all we do. May it be so. Amen.

⁵ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_august_9_2015

⁶ Renewing Life Participant Manual

⁷ http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_can_i_live_here

⁸ http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_can_i_live_here