

September 11, 2011 (10th anniversary)
First Baptist Vancouver

Text: Ephesians 5:1-2

Title: "Imitators of God. Really?"

(Series: "Navigating An Alternative Reading of Reality")

"Therefore, be imitators of God."

Ephesians chapter five, verse one. "Therefore, be imitators of God." Really?

The word the apostle Paul uses translated "imitators" is "mimetes" from which we get the English word "mimic." "Therefore, be mimics of God ... mimic God." Really? Ten years ago today, the world witnessed one of the worst manifestations of evil ever experienced in history. Suicide bombers using passenger airliners brought down the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, symbols of Western strength and invincibility, resulting in the death of some 3,000 people, and causing un-told grief for thousands more. The event has been re-played over and over again on the screens of the world's televisions and computers. The event has changed the world in ways yet to be fully understood. All around the globe today people are remembering that horrific morning. Remembering the devastation and carnage. And remembering the amazing ways ordinary people sacrificed themselves for others. I am thinking of the people of Gander, Newfoundland. That little town of 9,000 who extended generous hospitality to 6,700 passengers and crew members of airlines grounded after the closure of U.S. airspace. And I am thinking of the hundreds of fire-fighters and police officers who died trying their best to rescue as many as they could. Over the summer I have prayed about what text of Scripture I should preach on 9/11/11. I have thought that maybe I should preach from one of the great Prophets, Isaiah or Jeremiah. Or maybe from Amos or Micah, sounding again their passion for justice. Or maybe from the Prophet Habakkuk, the prophet who helps us see the movements of peoples and nations as part of God working out His justice; the prophet who calls us from fear to faith:

"Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet will I exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in God my salvation" (3:17-18).

Or I thought maybe I should preach from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus calls us away from un-redeemed instinct of "eye for eye and tooth for tooth," showing us that living by such an instinct means a person or a people or a nation has no inherent moral compass, but is simply "echoing" the behavior of one's opponent. And where Jesus then calls us to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us. But as I prayed, I sensed the Lord saying, "Stay the course." Last January we began a study in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We began a series, which I have called, "Navigating An Alternative Reading of Reality." We paused the series the end of June, having worked our way

through the end of chapter four. “Stay the course,” the Lord seemed to say. And as I honored this sense of His leading, I came to see just how appropriate the remaining chapters, chapters five through six, are, not only for the anniversary of 9/11, but for everything else the world is facing and experiencing right now. In the remaining chapter of his letter, Paul exhorts us, “Therefore, be imitators of God ... walk in love.” Do not be imitators of those you fear, which is what we do when we let fear rule our hearts. He exhorts us, “Therefore, walk as children of the light.” Get your cues not from the darkness all around you, but from Jesus Christ the Light Who shines on you. He exhorts us, “Therefore, be careful how you walk ... for the days are evil. Be filled with the Spirit. In this Age of Anxiety let the very life of the Living God fill you.” And Paul exhorts us, “Be strong in the Lord. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the evil one,” against the real enemy behind visible enemies. Very timely exhortations. Would you not agree?

So, I will “stay the course.” We will finish what we began. Our text today is Ephesians 5:1-2. Hear the Word of God. “Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.” Before focusing on the main exhortation of the text – “be imitators of God” – let me call your attention to a number of features of the text that help us keep the focus on the main exhortation.

First, “therefore.” Many of you know the little saying, “When reading the Bible and coming across the word ‘therefore’ you are to ask, ‘What is the “therefore” there for?’” As we have worked our way through Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we have come to see that he composed it in two halves, two almost equal-in-length halves. Chapters 1 to 3. And chapter 4 to 6.

Chapters 1 to 3 – an alternative reading of reality. Chapters 4 to 6 – living the alternative reading of reality. Or as a young New Testament scholar, Timothy Gombis, suggests: Chapters 1 to 3 – the drama of God’s triumph in Christ. Chapters 4 to 6 – the roles we have been assigned to play in the unfolding drama. Chapters 1 to 3 begin with a Blessing and end with a Benediction. Chapter one: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (1:3). Paul then goes on to open up the blessings, or some of the blessings, for there are more blessings than Paul names in his letter!

In Christ we were chosen from the foundation of the world; we are adopted into the family that is God; we have been redeemed by the blood of Christ; our sins have been forgiven; we have been clued in on the mystery of history; we have obtained an inheritance; we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance, we have been made alive with Christ; we have been raised up with Christ; we have been seated with Christ where Christ is seated; we are God’s workmanship, God’s ‘poem,’ created for good works in the world. In Christ, we have been brought near to God, so near we now constitute God’s temple in the world; we now have direct access into God’s Holy Presence, through Christ, in the Spirit; the Spirit strengthens us with power in our inner being; Christ dwells in our hearts, He makes our hearts His home; we are learning to grasp how broad and long and high and deep is the love of Christ; we are being filled up to all the fullness of God! Blessings

indeed. Then the Benediction: “Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or imagine, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen” (3:22-21). Amen indeed.

And then, chapter four, verse one – “Therefore.” Of course! Realizing what Paul develops in chapters 1 to 3 there has to be a “therefore.” In fact, a series of “therefore-s.” Chapter four, verse one – “Therefore, I entreat you to walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” Chapter four, verse seventeen – “Therefore, walk no longer” as those who walk in the futility of mind. Chapter four, verse twenty-five – “Therefore, laying aside all falsehood, speak the truth ...” Chapter five, verse one – “Therefore, be imitators of God ...” Chapter five, verse fifteen – “Therefore, be careful how you walk ...be filled with the Spirit ...” “Therefore.”

A second feature of the text: “walk.” Some translations render Paul’s word simply as “live.” I prefer “walk,” for it emphasizes the Biblical vision of the spiritual life - we are not only made to simply live, but to “move out,” to be active, to take a new road, to walk. Chapter four, verse one – “walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” Chapter four, verse seventeen – “walk no longer as “ those who walk in the futility of mind. Chapter five, verse two – “walk in love.” Chapter five, verse eight – “walk as children of light. Chapter five, verse fifteen – “be careful how you walk ...” “Walk.”

The third feature, crucial to hold before us: “just as.” “Just as Christ also loved you ...” Imitate God. How? Walk in love. What does that look like? “Just as Christ also loved you ... Paul uses the phrase a number of times in the letter ... in all of his letters. Chapter one, verse four – “just as He chose us in Him,” in Christ. Chapter four, verse thirty-two – “forgive one another, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” Chapter five, verse twenty-five – “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself up for her.” “Just as.”

Let us now focus on the main exhortation: “be imitators of God.” It is a huge challenge. A challenge above all challenges. A seemingly impossible challenge. Can you think of anything more challenging? In every realm of life: family, work, sports, politics, economics, academics. “Mimic God.” Really?

This is the only place in the Bible where the challenge is put this way. But the challenge is there all over the place. In the Old Testament, the First Testament. Leviticus 19:2 “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Deuteronomy 10:17-19 – “Show your love for the alien, the stranger, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt,” and the Lord loved you. Deuteronomy 15:12-15 – God’s people are to free servants every seven years, for “you were slaves and the Lord your God redeemed you. Over and over again: Because I am Who I am, you be; because I have done for you, so you do. Jesus speaks the challenge, especially in His Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:44-45 -“Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be children of You Father who is in heaven; for He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” Matthew 5:48 – “Therefore, you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father in perfect.” Yikes!

Now, as you read the unfolding Story the Bible tells, this imitating God slowly and rightly becomes imitating Jesus, the Son of God, God in our flesh. “Follow Me”, He

says. And we soon discover that He is following God His Father. When, Jesus calls us to imitate God, He is calling us to do what He does. We imitate God by imitating Jesus, God made flesh, God in our skin, God in our shoes. So the apostle Peter can say – 1 Peter 2:21 – “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to following His steps. We imitate the God we cannot see by walking “in the steps” of the God we can see.

You may know that this language led to a tradition within the Christian Church of calling people to an almost literal imitation of Jesus. Most powerfully so in the book “The Imitation of Christ”, written by Thomas a Kempis in the early 15th century. Many significant players in Western history have sought to live out a Kempis’ vision. One many will know was Dag Hammarskjöld, the Swedish statesman of the 20th century, who in fearfully turbulent times served as General Secretary of the United Nations. Hammarskjöld lived in the book, keeping a copy by his bed-side.

This tradition also came to the fore in the early 20th century in a book “In His Steps” by Charles Sheldon, a powerful story of a fictitious community seeking to do just that ... follow in the steps of Jesus. It was this book that posed the question that comes around every so often, found on posters and wrist bands: WWJD? What would Jesus do? The thought is that when facing choices, one is to ask WWJD? John Stackhouse, in his helpful book, “Making the Best Of It: Following Christ in the Real World,” argues that the question is finally not all that helpful; it is the wrong question. For one thing, we are not and never will be Jesus. He makes us like Him, but we will never actually be Him. And for another, Jesus is doing a unique work: He is bringing to fulfillment the promises to Israel, He is inaugurating the Kingdom of God, He is confronting and defeating the enemies of life, sin, evil and death. None of which any of us can do.

If WWJD is not the right question, what is? It is WIJD. What IS Jesus doing? And the call is then to co-operate with what Jesus is doing; the call is to participate in what Jesus is doing. Still the exhortation, the challenge of challenges, is there in the text: “be imitators of God.” So, let us dig deeper. As I wrestle with the challenge of the Ephesians text, three questions come to mind that can help us: where? What? How? Question one: Where can I see God as God really is so I know what I am to imitate? Question two: Clearly, I cannot imitate everything about God; I cannot imitate any of the “omni-s”: God’s omni-presence, God’s omni-potency, God’s omni-science, God’s all knowing. So, question two, what about God does God specifically want me to imitate? Question three: How in the world can I a mere human being, and a sinful human being at that, possibly imitate anything Divine?

Question one: Where can I see God as God really is so I know what I am to imitate? All over the place! God has revealed Himself as He really is all over the place. In creation, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands”, sings the Psalmist (19:1). Through creation God daily tells us who He is and what He is like.

And in historical acts like Exodus. For the people of the Old Testament, God clearly revealed His nature and character when He rescued them from Egypt. In the face of injustice and oppression, God meets Moses at the burning bush, and declares: “I have surely seen the affliction of My people ... I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, I am aware of their suffering [I feel their sufferings], and I have come down

to deliver” (Exodus 3:7-8). For centuries the Jews have hung on to that fundamental revelation of the true God.

And we see God in His good Law, especially in the Ten Commandments. Which does not begin with “you shall not,” but with “I am the Lord your God.” The Jews loved the Law because in it they saw the character and passions of the Living God. Interestingly, on either side of his exhortation in Ephesians 5:1 – “be imitators of God” – Paul seems to be giving a Christian-ized re-working of the Commandments. AND we see God in the incarnation, in God’s coming to live as one of us in Jesus of Nazareth. How often did Jesus say things like, “They who have seen Me have seen the One Who sent Me”? (John 12:45) How often did Jesus say things like, “I only do what I see My Father doing”? (John 5:19-20) As we watch Jesus act, as we watch Him relate to children and women and outcasts and the elite, we are watching God at work. So we see God as God really is in creation, in the Exodus, in the Law, and chiefly in the life of Jesus.

Question two: What about all that God has revealed about God does God want me to imitate? His works in creating the world? No way! God did it all “out of nothing.” I cannot do that. You cannot do that. But we can co-operate with and participate in God’s creative works. We can join in God’s passion for order, and beauty, and bounty. And we can resist, even reject, work that brings chaos, that devalues the human person, that deprives anyone of God’s abundance.

Imitate God of the Exodus? No way. That was a work no one can mimic. God overcame, “from outside” so to speak, entrenched oppression and an economic system that needed the poor to remain poor. People are trying to do this work. But we cannot finally do it ourselves. God must break in from outside the unjust systems. And does. And will. And we can co-operate with and participate in His work. And we can resist and reject all work that goes against His work.

The Law. Can we imitate the God of the Law? Here the answer is not “no way.” The Law emerges out of the Creator’s very being. The commandments emerge out of the heart and mind of the One Who made us. They tell us Who God is. Do not lie, because I, God, do not lie. Do not steal, because I, God, do not steal. Do not bear false witness, because I, God, do not do it. Do not commit adultery, because I, God, am faithful to you My Bride. And the commandments tell us who we are. The commandments are not just spun out of thin air. They are not an imposition on humanity; they are an exposition of who we are constituted to be. We are “hard-wired” for integrity and fidelity and generosity. We are “hard-wired” for keeping the Sabbath. Which is why we as individual and we as societies suffer when we violate the good Commandments. When we violate the good Law we violate ourselves.

Imitate the incarnation? Do all that we see Jesus doing? No. Not all. Not the work Jesus uniquely came to do. And certainly not all the “omni-s. I am freshly struck by the fact that Jesus Himself did not do all the “omni-s.” He could not copy His Father’s omnipresence. If He was in Jericho He could not be in Bethany. He did not copy His Father’s omni-science. He had to ask, “Who touched Me?” when crowds pressed around Him. He says He does not know the day of His return. So even God-in-the-flesh did not imitate everything about God! What He does imitate ... and what we are called to imitate ... is God’s love. As we watch Jesus relate to all kinds of different people we are watching the love of God in action, we are watching the love of His Father in action. “Like father, like

son,” they say. In nearly every conceivable human interaction we watch the visible-God copy the love of the invisible-God. And He then turns to us and say, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another AS I have loved you” (John 13:34). He had already re-iterated the two great commandments: love God with all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself. Love your neighbour the way you love yourself: you always make sure you have food and shelter and work; now make sure your neighbour has food and shelter and work. Radical command. But not as radical as Jesus’ new commandment. Love one another the way I love you. The way the God I am copying loves you.

Thus in our text, in Ephesians chapter five, Paul says, “be imitators of God, walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us.” “Gave Himself up for us.” That is what His love does. That is what love does. “Gave Himself up for us.”

Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd, the Good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:15). Jesus lays down all He is for us. Jesus gives up all He is for us. No one takes His life from Him. He gives it freely. When Jesus dies He is not a victim. Evil is not taking His life; evil is not taking Him down. He is giving Himself up for us. And this – of all that God reveals about Himself – this is what we are called to mimic.

This is what the apostle Paul makes so clear in the hymn he records in his letter to the Philippians (with which we began the Service today). Philippians 2:5-11. “Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus.” Think this way. Come at life this way. Copy this way: “Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus, Who *because* He existed in the form of God.” Not, “Who *although* He existed in the form of God.” Paul is not saying about God-in-the-flesh contradicting the way of God in heaven. “Who because He existed in the form of God” empties Himself. Not although ... but because. Because He existed in the form of God He empties Himself. Jesus thinks that the best way to be God is to empty Himself, to give Himself away. He takes the form of a servant. Again, not “although” He existed as God, but “because” He existed as God. He thinks the best way to be God is to be servant! He gets down on His knees and washes feet! And in that act, He is imitating God. He learned it from His Father. In washing feet He is imitating His Father. It is what the Father does. “Because” Jesus is God He washes feet. “Because” He is God He gives Himself up for us. He goes to the cross. He is only doing what He sees His Father doing. Jesus is imitating God when He gives Himself up on the cross.

I often imagine myself standing near the cross, asking, “Why are You doing this? You are God, why are You doing this?” Or I imagine myself in the Upper Room where Jesus is washing His disciples feet. I get down close to Jesus, and I ask, “Why are You, God-in-the-flesh, doing this? This is so incongruous for God. This is so beneath Divine dignity.”

And He looks up at me, and says, “You do not get it yet, do you? I only do what I see My Father doing. I am imitating the true and living God.” It is “because” Jesus is God that He lives as Servant. There is no other God but the God Who gives Himself for the life of the world.

Question three: How in the world am I, a mere human being, and a sinful one at that, to imitate such a God? Look at the text. It is full of Gospel! Good news. Notice how Paul puts it. “Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children” (5:1). “Beloved.” He used the term in the opening paragraph of the letter. 1:6 - “... to the praise of the glory of

His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved...” referring to Jesus Christ. He is the Beloved. And in relationship with Him we too are the beloved. Paul is saying that we can love because we are loved. We can love because we are being loved. We can wash feet because our feet are being washed. And Paul says, “children”... as “beloved children.” We have been adopted. Into the family that is God. The Father has adopted us, and is treating us the way He treats His only-begotten Son. The Father is loving us the way He loves Jesus the Son. “Like father, like son.” “Like father, like daughter.” Like Jesus we too are growing to the place where we say, “I only do what I see my father doing.” And in this relationship we are being re-created. We were originally created in the image of God. We sinned. We fell. The image was distorted. But God is re-creating us. In the image of Jesus Christ, Who is the image of God. Ephesians chapter four, verse twenty-four – “and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created ...” We are being created in the image of the God Who thinks being God means giving Himself up for the life of the world. What Paul is saying to us today is that the people of our city are to look at us, and at other congregations, and be able to say, “So, that is what God is like?” The waiter at the restaurant where we eat today, is to say as we leave, “So, that is what the God of love looks like?” Our fellow-workers at the office are to say as we as we interact with them, “So, that is what the God of the cross looks like?” The fact is, we all mimic some god. Dare I say, we all automatically mimic the god we really believe in? We can sing all the hymns, recite all the creeds. What we really believe comes out in the way we treat people. We all copy the god we really believe in.

The good news is that we can copy the True and Living God. For we are being re-created in the image of this God. Our DNA is being altered. It is now in our DNA to give ourselves up for others. Miserable people are miserable because they do not yet get it. Miserable people are turned in on themselves. They are violating who they were created to be.

The fire-fighters who gave themselves up for others on 9/11 may or may not have ever heard Paul’s exhortation, “Therefore, be imitators of God.” But they did what human beings re-created in the image of the God we meet in Jesus are hard-wired to do.

Be still before this God. And ask Him to show you just one way today and this coming week you can imitate THIS God and give yourself up for someone else.