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Season after Pentecost  
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### Imitators of God

Ephesians 4:25-5:2      *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,  
and live [walk] in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself  
up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

Paul begins the fourth chapter of his Letter to the Ephesians with these words:

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life  
worthy of the calling to which you have been called... (4:1)*

Up to this point, Paul has been speaking in lofty theological terms about what God has done for us in Christ, giving us a new life, reconciling us to God and to one another. By God's gracious gift of love in Christ, we have a whole new orientation and foundation to our lives. We are made new.

Now Paul wants to talk about what this new life looks like in practical and ethical terms. Life in Christ means life in community. It means being mindful of how we conduct ourselves in relationship to one another. Christian life is not a matter of one single moment of conversion, one moment of commitment, one moment of spiritual enthusiasm. It is a life-long process of learning and transformation. This new life is to unfold in us throughout our lives as we center our lives daily in the spirit, teachings, and of Jesus, letting ourselves be shaped by him.

"So then," writes Paul, "putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

Paul doesn't just mean we are to stop lying. Speaking falsely can mean much more than that. It can mean not speaking from our hearts. It can mean stifling negative feelings and pretending everything is fine. It can mean failing to speak with one another about the claim Christ has on all of us, calling one another to account for the life to which we have been called. Speaking falsely can mean harboring resentments and hidden demands, so that they build up in hostility and pent-up disappointments. When we do this, we build up interior walls against others and spiritually separate ourselves from those we secretly resent. Paul is saying that we need to communicate with one another in humility and honesty.

However, speaking the truth in this way does not mean "letting someone have it." Paul is not recommending an emotional free-for-all in which we simply vent our anger on others. Back in verse 15 of this chapter Paul wrote: "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...." Our speaking the truth must be in the spirit of love, of concern for others, not simply venting. Paul reminds us that the reason we are to speak the truth to one another is that "we are members of one another." We belong to one another in the love Christ has for each and all of us. Our speaking needs to be honest, even when that is difficult or painful. We need to be open to hearing the truth spoken to us, even when it tells us something uncomfortable about ourselves. But all of this is so that the community might be stronger in love.

Paul's call to speak the truth means being real with one another. Not needing to put up a front. Not needing to hide our shortcomings and frailties. Not expecting others to be perfect or to meet our expectations of them. And always, our speaking the truth needs to be toward reconciliation and deeper understanding.

"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil."

Paul doesn't say "Don't be angry!" I grew up in a very loving family. And yet we seldom expressed anger. Anger was viewed as an emotion one could do without, or should not

experience. This was a problem for me growing up. What should I do with my anger? Over the years I learned that anger is an emotion like any other, neither good nor bad, simply an emotional response to life. When we are hurt, we feel anger. When we are afraid, anger is a defensive response. When we see suffering and injustice, we feel anger at the causes of those conditions. Anger is part of our emotional make up.

The problem is not anger, but what we do with it. Paul thinks that we can be angry but “not sin.” We have a choice about how we respond to our anger. We can deal with it, or we can let it cause us to inflict injury on others. “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Here is a call to acknowledge our anger, to become aware of it when it happens. We are not to deny our anger and push it down, in which case it only grows more powerful. Nor are we to lash out at others, which only increases suffering in us and others. Deal with your anger before the sun goes down, says Paul. Don’t let it persist from day to day. How can we do this?

First, we become aware of our anger. Not denying it. Not feeling guilty about it. But simply acknowledging in that we have anger in us. It is amazing how, when we are angry, if we simply become aware of the anger, not treating it as an intruder, an enemy, but embracing it and taking care of it, this already begins to quiet and settle our anger.

Second, once we have cooled our anger a bit by awareness, we can look deeply to understand the roots of our anger. My anger may have arisen because I did not understand a person’s actions or words. Perhaps I had expectations of someone or of life I had no right to have, so I became disappointed and angry. The person I am angry with may have acted or spoken out of her or his own hurt or inner struggles, about which I know nothing. My anger at an unjust situation or action may be the beginning of my understanding of that situation so that I might become involved to make things better. In all of this, it is better to befriend our anger through awareness and understanding than to deny it and try to drive it out of our inner life. Our anger can lead us to better and deeper understandings of ourselves, others, and life itself.

Finally, I can take steps to express my anger in ways that lead to reconciliation and keep me from inflicting further harm on others, the community, or the world. I put this one as the third step, not because we shouldn’t express our anger at the moment when we become angry. Paul doesn’t say that we shouldn’t do this. However, there is a better way, and that is to express our anger when we have cooled down, have some perspective, and can do so in ways that build community rather than destroy it. Our society, it seems to me, is a very angry society, with people venting anger all over the place. There is much confrontation but little understanding, much insistence on what I think is my right, but little commitment to seeking the common good. When we face and embrace our anger, seek to understand where it is coming from, and when we remember that the other person is, like me, a child of God, then we are ready to deal with our anger in ways that bring resolution, reconciliation, and understanding.

Then Paul writes something that seems to contradict what he has just said. We are to “put away” bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, and malice. Paul now seems to say that we CAN put away anger, along with other attitudes and responses that fracture community, that are part of our “old existence,” not the “new existence” in Christ. How can we do this? How can we do away with those feelings and responses that cause us and others suffering, that work against the kind of community we are to have in Christ? How can we become the kinds of persons who are not only working for peace, for a compassionate and just world, for the kingdom of God, but are also those in whom that kingdom, that peace, that compassion dwell?

I would like to think of what Paul calls “putting away” as a process of inner transformation. We can transform bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander and malice into something else, something better. Kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness, compassion, peaceableness. We do this not by turning our inner life into a battlefield, warring against those feelings and attitudes, but through embracing them in the light of God’s grace. God’s grace is like sunshine, shining upon the earth, bringing growth and new life. God’s grace works in us through our awareness, our nonjudgmental acceptance of the reality of our inner life, with its mixture of pleasant and unpleasant, constructive and destructive feelings and responses. As we

are more and more able to simply acknowledge and understand those feelings, as we become more aware of them, we find that they lose their force and do not control us.

Our practice of prayer and meditation is the primary way we let the sunshine of God's grace transform our inner life. We become more aware, in honesty and humility, of our anger, fear, or hostilities. And in the awareness that comes in the atmosphere of prayer, those feelings and response are exposed to the light of God's loving grace. It does not happen quickly perhaps, but we discover that practicing in this way, over time, we become more self-accepting. The feelings become less intense and we are able to look deeply into them and gain understanding of ourselves and others. Where does my fear come from? Why was I defensive? What is the root of my anger? When I begin asking these kinds of questions, then I am walking the path of understanding and compassion, with myself and with others. I am being transformed.

Finally, Paul says an astounding thing: "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."

We are to be imitators of God! Scripture speaks very highly of us human beings! In the first creation story of Genesis 1, we read that we are created in the very image of God. Psalm 8 speaks of human beings created only a "little lower than God" and "crowned with glory and honor." In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that we are the "light of the world" and a "city set on a hill." Now Paul calls us to imitate God. We are able to imitate God. We are able to live in the kind of love with which Christ loved us. We are able, like Christ, to make our lives a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

The word Paul uses here is from the Greek word *mimesis*, which has a great fullness and richness of meaning. It can mean simply being obedient to God. But it means far more than that. When an artist creates a sculpture or painting or song, something invisible has been given visibility. A vision or dream has taken form and shape. This work of art is *mimesis*. For Paul our lives can be this "imitation" of God, this outward expression of our inner relationship with God. This is what we were meant for, to make our lives an expression of God. Sure, there is much about us that gets in the way of this kind of imitating of God, and Paul has been talking about those things—dishonesty, pretending, anger. But Paul doesn't leave us there. He tells us that we can transform those things, that we can continue to become what we God has made us—beloved children of God whose very lives reflect God. Even our very struggles to become new, even our honest and sometimes painful struggles with ourselves, are a reflection of God, an imitation of God, for they are the workings of love within us.

A last comment. Paul's words can also be read this way: "Be imitators only of God." We get ourselves into a lot of trouble when we try to imitate other people. Even our attempts to imitate someone who is a great spiritual influence on us are doomed to failure. For we are not then being our true selves, the unique persons through whom God is seeking expression. Having spiritual heroes is not necessarily a bad thing, for we do receive inspiration from others who have walked this path in an extraordinary way. But when we take them as our models, trying to "be like" them, we abandon our own uniqueness and our need to express or imitate God in our own lives, our gifts, our relationships, our circumstances.

So, maybe we can sum up this whole reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians in this way: Be real, be authentic, and in this way you will grow in love, the very love with which God has loved us, which we know in Christ. When we are doing that, we will be imitators of God, those in whose lives God's own life and love are being expressed.