

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

The Imitation Game August 12, 2018

There has been a funny app on Facebook where they can take your picture and manipulate it in such a way to make you look like someone of the opposite gender. My daughter decided she would do that and when the picture came up I did a double take because I thought it was me. I may start calling her Junior! We have a lot of physical traits that are similar, and people don't have any trouble recognizing that we are family. It reminds me of our reading this morning as we consider how we imitate Jesus. How we resemble his loving actions and purpose in the world. And we do so because we have been transformed by his love for us, a transformation that is still going on, at least for me anyway.

I love some of Paul's imagery here, don't you? Be imitators of God! I translate that as meaning, "Follow in God's footsteps or be a chip off the old block or be the apple that doesn't fall far from the tree."

Be a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Now that's a good one and you may need a bit of context to fully appreciate it. There was a lot of smell involved in the offering of sacrifices in Jesus' day. Burnt offerings of animals and grains were a regular occurrence and the very aroma of those things would bring memories and emotions to those who lived in that time. Memories of God's promises and Love. Something Jesus was trying to remind them of.

And we too have responses to certain aromas, don't we? A certain perfume? Perhaps one that your mother or grandmother wore? Dad's cologne or the smell of oil and gasoline reminding you of working on the car together or the smell of sawdust or wood from some building project? Home baked biscuits and country ham, or cornbread just like grandma used to make, a smell that would permeate the whole house or even waft out into the yard as you drove up the driveway. And isn't it just wonderful that Paul gives us this image? That he suggests that because Jesus loves you so much and has made your life anew, that you too are a pleasing fragrance in the world. That as we imitate his love and care for others we become an aroma that makes the world a place of kindness and forgiveness, joy and peace. As someone said in one of the sermons I read, "I smell Jesus all over you."

Now thinking about it is one thing. But actually imitating Jesus is another, that's the hard part, isn't it? That's where I fall down, and I'll bet you do too. And there is another aspect of this that haunts me just a little and that is, if I'm imitating Jesus, then who might be imitating me?

I read a story about a mother in Costa Mesa, California. who had a large family and for her, every day was hectic but on this particular day, however, she was having trouble doing even routine chores all because of one of her little boys.

Len, who was three at the time, was on her heels no matter where she went. Whenever she stopped to do something and turned back around, she would trip over him. Several times, she patiently suggested fun activities to keep Len occupied. "Wouldn't you like to play on the swing set?" she asked again. But he simply smiled an innocent smile and said, "Oh, that's all right, Mommy. I'd rather be in here with you."

After stepping on his toes for the fifth time, Len's mom began to lose her patience and insisted that he go outside and play with the other children. When she asked him why he was acting this way, he looked up at her and said, "Well, Mommy, my Sunday School teacher told me to walk in Jesus' footsteps. But I can't see Jesus, so I'm walking in yours." Like Len's mom, we are to imitate God by walking in the footsteps of Jesus so that others will follow, too.

And the way of Jesus, as Paul describes it, is to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven you, and live in love, as Christ loved us. Now that all seems pretty easy doesn't it? A piece of cake! Well honestly, it's not. And I confess I fail at this about as often as I succeed but by the grace of God, I will continue to listen and learn and try to be a kinder and more loving person.

And kindness seems to be the hardest thing for me right now. And as I look out on the landscape of the world I live in, it seems to be a difficult thing for others as well. Our current cultural climate is one where acts of unkindness seem to be getting a lot more attention than acts of love. And each day we listen to the news of another unkind act towards somebody or some organization. It reminds me of that old saying, "if it weren't for bad news, there wouldn't be any news at all!" And that may just be the way things are. The media doesn't really have time to tell us about the good news of the day, though some try to include that, usually at the end of a broadcast.

And what is most troubling for me is that much of the unkindness ones sees in the news is actually coming from many folks who say they are Christians, who submit to Jesus, and who believe that they are imitating him, and that has me scratching my head a little. I wonder about that and I wonder what kind of letter Paul would send to us today? Because I have to be honest and say that I am in that group of people as well. I am not always kind or forgiving. I am often not a fragrant offering to those around me and my particular fragrance in the world would probably be called 'Eau-de-stank-eee!' I would be the 'Pepe' Le Pew' of the family, and if it weren't for the grace of God and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, I would be the most wretched of persons.

But Jesus keeps nudging us and encouraging us to follow him and try to be like him. Sharing his love, listening to his voice, surrendering to God's will, and giving ourselves up as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Which I believe means, paying attention and listening to the Holy Spirit and reaching out to others when God speaks to you and do so in loving ways. And if you, like our little boy this morning, don't see Jesus, then look for someone who does. Someone who you can walk in the steps of. Someone who won't mind if you step on their heels a little bit because they know you are doing your best just to be faithful.

I heard this wonderful true story by Bill Hart. And I think he is someone I'd like to shadow for a while. Bill is a sales executive and business coach. He and his wife were out having lunch when he noticed at a nearby table an elderly woman being seated. She was an elegant and nicely dressed woman and was soon joined by her family. It must have been a celebration of some sort. And about that time Bill says, "In my mind, a voice kept saying," "You need to go tell her how pretty she looks." Well, the food arrives and then the check, and then he and Toni, his wife, are going to go look for something in the mall. As they walk past the woman's table Bill bends down and looks her in the eye and said, "Hey, if nobody else has told you yet today, I just want you to hear it

from me, how lovely you are.” And she looks at me, with a look I’ve never seen before and says, “I know you.” And I said, “No we don’t know each other.” And she said, “I know your spirit.” And it gets really quiet between us. And she says, “My husband died a year ago and that’s something he would have said to me.” and at that moment, I can’t talk. I can’t talk. I’m overcome by emotion and I just hug her and smile at her through tears and I leave. But here’s what I know and here’s the reason I’m telling you this. I believe that God taps us on the shoulders and uses us at just the right moment. And what I know for sure is that she was blessed, and I was enormously blessed. So, I’ve learned in my life to listen to these shoulder taps because they do happen. and I believe that the more we listen to them the more in alignment we are with God and that’s an awesome place to be.”

That sure sounds like a story about Jesus, doesn’t it? I’m just thinking of the many times Jesus sat with someone and looking them in the eyes, told them how much he loved them. How much God loved them and how precious they are. Isn’t that something we all need to hear? Isn’t that the Good News! The very Good News! And I sure hope I can imitate the love I hear from Bill and from Jesus and I hope you can too.

I’m in a production of Godspell right now and one of the songs which you may know is called Day by Day. And the chorus reminds me of what we are to be about each and every day as followers of Jesus. It goes like this:

*Day by day, day by day,
Oh, dear Lord three things I pray:
to see thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
follow thee more nearly, day by day.*

So, put away all that bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice. And be imitators of Christ. Showing kindness, forgiveness, being tender-hearted with one another, and live in love, just as Christ has loved you. Be the apple that doesn’t fall far from the tree, a chip off the old block, like father, like son, like mother, like daughter. That in that final moment, and you know what I mean, God will turn and say to you and me, “Well done junior. Well Done.” Thanks be to God, Amen.