

Imitating God - Living in Love.

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist, August 11th, 2024 - John 6:35, 41-51 & Ephesians 4:25-5:2)

When I was young, I wanted to be as funny as my Pa, able to cook as well as my Grandma and be as generous as her and be able to play tennis like Evonne Goolagong, an all-round player and full of grace. As I got older, I found more role models, then I wanted to imitate Roger Federer on the tennis court, be a great teacher like Miss Kelleher (my grade 6 teacher), be as creative and good at debating as lawyer Geoffrey Roberston and preach like Rev Graeme Garrett who could hold an audience on the edge of their seat for an hour with his story telling.

Do you have role models? Is there someone you want to be like? Are there people you wanted to imitate? Maybe musicians or artists, or humanitarian workers or sports people or dancers or chefs. Did you want to cook like Nigella or Jamie Oliver? Did you want to ride like Cadel Evans or play like Gary Ablett? Did you want to be as kind and compassionate as Father Bob or Mother Teresa or Fred Hollows? What was it in them that you wanted to imitate? Their kindness, or gentleness, their generosity or grace. Was it their selflessness, their discipline or their fair-mindedness or their willingness to put others before themselves?

Oscar Wilde said that imitation was the sincerest form of flattery. I guess that means that when we truly admire someone, we want to be a little bit like them.

In our readings today Paul explains that we are called to be imitators of God. This imitation is not an act of flattery as suggested by Oscar Wilde. It, according to Paul, has more to do with our identity, about being who we are. We are imitators of God, precisely because we are the beloved children of God and as such we are called to live in love and act in similar ways to Jesus.

We are called to imitate Jesus. We are shown what he is like in the gospels. In the last few weeks, we have been reading from John about the way in which Jesus had great compassion on the crowds who are following him and heals the sick, teaches them and feeds them when they are hungry. We have seen him welcome outsiders, create abundance out of seemingly nothing – water into wine, two fish and five loaves feed a crowd of 5000 with heaps of leftovers. We have heard him teach that people are more important than rules and that all we really need to do is love God and love our neighbours. Ultimately, we see him on the cross, taking on his shoulders all the violence and hatred the world can throw at him. So, there is a little bit here for us to imitate.

We are called to imitate God, who Paul reminds us, is forgiving. Fairly straightforward then, if so, why do we find it so hard to imitate?

Paul, once again, helps us out by spelling out what this means to those in Ephesus and to us as well.

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First, speak the truth. No white lies, no half-truths, no lying. Speak plainly with one another. No manipulation of facts or self-deceit or playing games. Honesty is what is required, honesty with each other and with our selves. However, this needs to be couched in gentle terms, as we will see later, when Paul speaks about how we use words. We need to speak the truth in love.

Second, remember we are a community, we are members of one another. Together we are the children of God, brothers and sisters, people who are there for each other, ready to share the burdens of another, ready to share the joys and sorrows of each other.

Third, be careful about how you deal with your anger. Anger is not wrong; it is what we do with it that is the issue. Anger is often a secondary feeling, it may be preceded by grief or pain or hurt. If we let it fester then it becomes a problem, that is when we explode at others, and it all gets out of control. Alternatively, we might swallow it up and end up with depression or self-harming. So, we must deal with our anger appropriately, not let our sun go down on it otherwise we will harm others or ourselves.

Fourth, don't steal as we need to work for what we need and what others need. I don't imagine many of us are guilty of individual theft. However, as a developed nation we participate in the theft of wages and resources of those in the two thirds world. Think about how little we pay for clothes and what that means for wages for people in, for example, Bangladesh. Or think about how we make countries grow what we need rather than what they need for their people – a kind of corporate theft. Some reflection and honesty here might lead us to sharing the earth's resources with the needy.

Next, be gracious. However we do these things, we must do it with grace, with kindness, with a tender heart.

Then, don't grieve the Holy Spirit. What does this mean do you think? I think it means stopping the Spirit from working in us and in the community. Where the Spirit is there is freedom, there is joy, there is compassion, there is encouragement, blocking such things is grieving or disappointing the Spirit, the Spirit which is God's presence with us and in the church.

Next, be careful with your words – don't be bitter or malicious or slanderous. Language is powerful – it can cut people down, it can hurt, it can ruin reputations, **but** it can also encourage, and build up. We are called to use it to build up others.

Finally, be forgiving. There is no avoidance of this, it is central to our faith, it is essentially what the cross is about. It is at the heart of all things. When I worked with young offenders, I often thought about this. You see, society wasn't able to forgive them, they incarcerated them instead. As I watched them and worked with them, I became convinced that at the core of them turning their lives around, was showing them forgiveness, giving them a second chance. Why, because I was convinced that our God was the God of second chances, and so should we be.

And in all of this you will be imitators of God. In all of this you will be imitators of Jesus. In this you will be bread for the world given so that all might have life in all its fullness, life in abundance. In all of this you will be living in love. Amen.