

## Imitating God

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

August 9, 2009

Do any of the rest of you have the problem I have of becoming angry about something and then acting upon that anger in such a way that you leave a bad impression about yourself on the one you've taken your anger out on?

A man by the name of Bob Monkhouse shares a story about a time when he got angry at the manager of his local dry cleaners. He left no doubt about his displeasure only later to understand that he left a pretty bad impression.

He knew that to be the case because of an interaction his wife later had with the manager after he neglectfully left the cap off of a red ballpoint pen in the breast pocket of a white shirt. His wife tried unsuccessfully to wash it out, but finally decided to let the dry cleaner have a go at it.

The manager of the dry cleaner to which Bob had exploded took a long, slow look at the dark red stain on the front of the shirt and then looked sideways at Bob's wife as he quietly offered, "Good shot."<sup>1</sup>

The story of the encounter between Harvard professor, Henry Gates, and the Cambridge police officer, James Crowley, and the comment by President Obama that followed makes us painfully aware that our society is not as transformed around the issue of race as we have hoped. While most people agree that probably everyone involved is guilty of overreaction, still the situation helps to highlight that we have a ways to go when it comes to race relations in this country.

In Mary Austin's sermon "The Professor and the Police Officer – How Far Have We Not Come?" she notes: "The story grips our attention because each man in the story is a stand-in for a larger group of people – hard-working police officers who face the unknown every time they answer a call, often stepping into danger in service of the public; and black people of every economic strata who know their own terror after having to explain their presence in a store or neighborhood where someone thinks they look out of place, or after being stopped for 'driving while black,' as the African-American community calls the experience of being pulled over by the police for no discernable reason. Even the president is a stand-in for a larger cause – our belief in the American dream, and the hope that anyone in this country can rise as far as their talents will take them, without the hindrance of gender, skin color, sexual orientation, disability, or the disadvantage of being born into poverty."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout Paul's writings there's the message that when one becomes a follower of Jesus Christ's – things change. We are expected to live differently. There is this calling of us to a new life – to a new humanity – to a new way of looking at the world – to a new social order – to a life of being transformed.

Perhaps nowhere was Paul clearer about what it takes to do this than in his letter to the people of Ephesus. And perhaps, nowhere is it more succinctly put than when he wrote in the first verse of the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children." Before he shared that thought with the Ephesians though he laid out some very specific ideas about some things he thought we should make part of our being to reflect our new nature.

"Don't lie," was the first guideline he provided. More specifically, he admonished the people of Ephesus and all of us who have followed in their footsteps to not tell lies about one another. "Speak the truth with one

another about one another.” And then he stated why he thought this was so important: “Speak truthfully with one another about one another because we are all members of (the same) body.” It’s the theme that underlies much of Paul’s teachings about how we are to relate to one another: “We are the Body of Christ – we are one with each other – we are a community – we are a team – what affects one of us, affects all of us.” A community of faith, the body of Christ, can only survive and thrive when all the parts of the body are truthful about one another – when we refrain from telling falsehoods about one another.<sup>3</sup>

Then Paul wrote this interesting comment about anger: “In your anger, don’t sin.” Let me try a paraphrase of it: “Be angry in such a way that your anger does not cause you to sin.”

Basically, what Paul was saying was that anger is not something we can avoid. It’s neither good nor bad in and of itself – it just is. It’s a natural emotion whose presence we cannot control. What we can control and what Paul is telling us we should is how we express or act upon our anger.

Paul wasn’t dealing here with what we refer to as righteous anger – that anger properly expressed regarding the injustices of society. What he was concerned about and warning about was selfish anger – a getting angry and striking out for slights to our feelings of personal importance – you know, temper tantrums, crossness, irritability – the kind of responses that cause further pain. Basically, Paul was saying to Christ’s followers in his day and in ours: “Your new life in Christ necessitates that you rid yourself of these sinful expressions of anger.”<sup>4</sup>

Then Paul turned his attention to those who stole: “Let him who was a thief steal no more; rather let him take to hard work, and to producing good with his hands, in order that he may be able to share with those in need.” Stealing was rampant in Paul’s day. It was especially common at the docks and in the public baths. The public baths were sort of these ancient health clubs. The most common crime was the stealing of the clothes and other belongings of the bathers and not just as a practical joke or childish prank. Paul believed such activity was incompatible with the new life. And he said that the way to cure this tendency toward stealing, this temptation to take from others, was to get your hands busy doing good work.

Notice especially that the purpose of this hard work with the hands though was not merely to keep your hands and minds busy so that they don’t have time to steal – it wasn’t simply to pay back those from whom a person stole. Rather, it was so the worker would have something to give away to those in need. It was a new understanding of the purpose of work. We should work not just to amass things for ourselves but so that others might benefit from the fruit of our work. It was radical in Paul’s day and it still is in ours.<sup>5</sup>

Well, Paul then went on and added that we should also banish from our experience the criticism of others – that we should rid ourselves of bitterness, outbreaks of passion, resentment, loud-talking and insults. And then he summed up all of his advice with this positive closing statement: “Be kind to one another, merciful, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you,” “forgave us.”

“Be kind.” What Paul had in mind was the Greek understanding of the word – that state of mind where one thinks as much of their neighbor’s affairs as one does of their own. Kindness is being as concerned about the feelings of other people as you are about your own feelings. It’s being as concerned about the sorrows, the struggles, the problems of other people as it is about your own. Kindness has learned the secret of looking outwards and not only inwards. Mercy grows out of this understanding of kindness. The forgiving others as God forgives us grows out of this understanding of kindness. In this one sentence Paul laid down a basic law

for personal relationships: “Treat others as Jesus Christ has treated us.” “Act this way because that’s the way God in Christ acted toward you.”

Apparently Paul wasn’t sure what he was writing was adequately communicating his point, and so he restated it with that powerful, attention-getting phrase I already planted in your heads: “Imitate God.” “Imitate God, therefore, as children who love their parents imitate their parents.” Want to get this whole thing right? Then, imitate God – act like God – treat others as God has treated you – do unto others as God has done unto us. “Be God-like.”

We imitate to become like. We are called to copy the love of God – to be copy cats of God.

And when it comes to how we are to imitate God it’s clear by the next verse that Paul had a particular imitating in mind: “Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” “If we are going to imitate God,” wrote Paul, “then we must imitate the love and the forgiveness of God as we know it through Jesus Christ’s living and dying and loving.”

When the great missionary Albert Schweitzer was on his way to Aspen, Colorado he had to change trains in Chicago. Reporters questioned him while he waited. A woman walked past them carrying a heavy suitcase. Schweitzer excused himself and took the heavy suitcase from the woman and accompanied her to her car. When he walked back to where he had left the reporters standing, they were gone. They had all gone to help others as they had observed Schweitzer do.

In his autobiography Schweitzer shared the reason he had helped the lady. Once when he and his wife were boarding a train in Africa a physically handicapped man whom Schweitzer had treated in his mission hospital came forward to help them with their enormous amount of luggage.

Schweitzer noted that the man had no luggage himself because he possessed nothing. Moved by the man’s offer Schweitzer vowed to himself that in memory of this man’s kindness he would in the future always watch for persons in need at train stations.<sup>6</sup>

Realtors tell us that it is difficult to sell a house when it is empty – a house just shows better when it is furnished. “Sellers are advised to have the home cleaned, have a fire going in the fireplace, turn on lamps, have soft music playing in the background, and place fresh flowers on tables and cabinets. The aura and smells that are presented to the customer are important. In major shopping malls the smells of baked cookies are sometimes injected into the ventilation system to lure customers toward the food court.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the challenges this text holds out for the church is that we are being called to live together in such a way as to provide society a sweet-smelling fragrance. “The image is one of Christians living together in such a way that they make an attractive presentation. Regardless of its physical beauty, a church ‘shows’ better when it is furnished with Christians who are compassionate toward one another. The aura and smells of the church are important to its potential members. How we relate to one another is one of the ways we present God to the world. Sometimes presentation is everything.”<sup>8</sup>

Let us pray.

1. Just Say a Few Words: The Complete Speaker's Handbook (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998) as quoted in King Duncan's sermon "Getting Rid of Anger."
2. Mary Austin, "The Professor and the Police Officer – How Far Have We Not Come?" [www.sermonsuite.com](http://www.sermonsuite.com).
3. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), p. 184.
4. Ibid. pp. 184-185.
5. Ibid. p. 187.
6. King Duncan, "Getting Rid of Anger," [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com).
7. Harold C. Warlick, "Sweet-Smelling Fragrance," [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com).
8. Ibid.