

## How Can We Choose to Imitate God?

People created by God – people sourced by immeasurable Love, I invite you to wonder with me this morning: How can we choose to imitate God? With deep gratitude, we have gathered this morning to worship God (that immeasurable Love) on this twelfth of twenty-six Sundays in our long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of the church year. We are gathered via livestream and here with land that has been in relationship with people for millennia before us. As we move into this time of wondering, let's first pause to pray.

Holy Loving Spirit, our souls cry out to you. We welcome you to sit with us as quiet, steady, loving energy. Nudge us toward next brave and vulnerable steps forward for the sake of your love and justice. Breathe a fresh word into each of our lives and into the life of this community. Guide the meditations of our hearts and minds Amen.

Love has gathered us here this morning so that we might be strengthened in our shared intention to follow in the way of Jesus, one who followed God's loving lead. Our question for today, drawn from the reading from Ephesians, is this: How will we choose to imitate God?

I invite you to close your eyes at this time if you're comfortable doing do. We'll have them closed for an extended moment. Imagine yourself in a specific outdoor setting of your childhood – one where kids gathered to play (perhaps the school playground, someone's backyard, a neighborhood park). And now find yourself lined up to play follow the leader. Bring to mind the name and face of someone who was likely to be early to the front of the line, taking their turn to lead the group. Now, in your mind's eye, see that leader removing themselves – moving away from the head spot.

(Keeping your eyes closed, with that group of kids in a line) Instead of the next child in line moving to the leader's spot, who from more recent years in your life would you choose to fill that leadership void, knowing that the whole group in the lineup will begin to imitate that one's movements? And now watch that person move to the front of the line.

(Keeping your eyes closed for a moment longer) Now imagine that, as the group (including you) starts imitating the movements of that leader, they lead you out of that playground or field and into a present-day space (be it your home, our church, or maybe a space in the world where there is conflict and suffering). **What movements or behavior is that person modeling? What do you see and hear in them that you'd like to imitate?**

I invite you to open your eyes without losing sight of that leader. And I invite you to share aloud if you'd like – not the name of the person or their role in your life – but a brief response to one of these questions: What movements or behavior does that person model? – or – What do you see or hear in them that you'd like to imitate? [*inclusion, kindness, awareness, energetic, courage, remembering birthdays*] Thank you for sharing some of what we'd like to pattern ourselves after.

Let's turn now to our scripture readings to see how the experiences of the fledgling first-century Christian community in Ephesus and the words of the Psalmist challenge and encourage us in our journeys toward imitating God – that is, seeking to follow the movements of Love.

Hear again how the writer to the Ephesians encouraged them and now encourages us to set aside our more destructive ways of being and to choose alternative life-affirming ways. Let's take these words of wise counsel one piece at a time.

We heard: *“Therefore, let’s have no more lies. Speak truthfully to each other, for we are all members of one body.”*

When we speak and act falsely, we feel in our guts and know that we diminish the strength of the body by disregarding the capacity of each of us to grapple with difficult truths. Let’s speak truthfully, even when our voices shake.

We heard: *“When you get angry, don’t let it become a sin. Don’t let the sun set on your anger, or you will give an opening to the Devil.”*

In the United Church of Christ (one of the traditions of our congregation), the word “sin” is often paired with the word “aimlessness.” We are all acquainted with anger. We know the feeling that someone’s words or actions have violated us or someone we love. Sometimes we need to respond protectively from a space of righteous anger. But if we let the sun keep setting on our anger, it gets stuck in us to such an extent that we will completely lose sight of the lead of Love. If we listen deeply, we will here God encouraging us to release anger’s tight grasp on our hearts.

We heard: *“You who have been stealing, stop stealing. Go to work. Do something useful with your hands, so you can have something to share with the needy.”*

Well, who among us believes that we steal from others? Likely none of us at first thought. But is there possibly a space in your life (be it your own home, your neighborhood, or our church) where you might become more fully engaged, sharing your energy and skill with others instead of keeping it hidden?

We heard: *“Be on your guard against foul talk. Say only what will build others up at that moment. Say only what will give grace to your listeners.”*

Well, alright now. Who here is part of the sailor mouth club like me? Or, if you wouldn't necessarily describe your language as foul (because what really is ugly and destructive language?), might you say things that are not only unnecessary but which fail to build others up? Could you give more grace in the things you say?

Finally, that early follower of Jesus wrote this: *"In place of these, be kind to one another, compassionate and mutually forgiving, just as God has forgiven you in Christ. Try, then [try!], to imitate God as beloved children. Walk in love as Christ loved us, and offered himself in sacrifice to God for us, a gift of pleasing fragrance."*

We would do well to study sacrifice in the lives of others and in our own lives. Jesus gave himself completely to the pursuit of a loving, just community in which all would thrive. On the first Sunday of each month, we celebrate Holy Communion at a table where all are welcome. The sacrament reminds us time and again how Jesus was willing to be persecuted as a direct result of pursuing a loving, just community for all with every breath he drew. The dehumanizing powers of status quo oppression and death snuffed out Jesus' life, but we are living proof that those powers could not silence his teachings and his model of a way of being. We know to what purpose Jesus gave himself – God's mission to build the beloved community.

Scriptures depict a teacher, healer and friend who was highly motivated, focused and grounded in his connection to the love of God. Simply put, Jesus moved through space and time as a man on a mission, a person with a clear, unwavering calling or purpose. Some years ago, a seminary classmate shared a Venn diagram with the word "purpose" at its center.

Essentially, the image depicts purpose as existing at the intersection of four factors, which are these:

- You love it
- The world needs it
- You are great at it
- You are paid for it

This Venn diagram depicting purpose is widely shared across the internet without clear reference to its original source.

We can experience purpose as we engage in the public sphere through employment and community service. I feel that the factors of “the world needs it” and “you are paid for it” predominately relate to our engagement in the public sphere. However, I’ve added my own twist to the four factors, inviting them to speak to the ways we engage in the endeavors and relationships of our private lives as well. I would change “the world needs it” to “the world or someone needs it” and I would change “you are paid for it” to “you are paid or appreciated for it.” In our private spheres, then, the four factors that intersect to create purpose as we engage in endeavors and relationships are these:

- You love it
- Someone needs it
- You are great at it
- You are appreciated for it

Purpose at the center of: you love it, someone needs it, you are great at it, you are appreciated for it. My hope for each of us is that we pursue doing what we love, what someone needs, what we are great at, and what we are appreciated for.

We will become better and better acquainted with our communal vision and mission as a church. I challenge and encourage each of us individually to actively work and wonder how our personal sense of purpose will contribute to us living out our mission (how we do things) in such a way that we can cocreate our vision.

Our mission is this: *“Moved by our deepening relationships with God and each other, we unite with the wider community to transform our values into action.”*

...So that we can cocreate with God our vision: *“We envision an ever-expanding safe harbor where we thrive together and work with God toward love and justice.”*

Again, I challenge and encourage us to actively wonder how our personal sense of purpose can contribute to our mission and vision.

Let’s hear again a few words of encouragement from the Psalmist (from their own personal experience):

*“If you kept track of our sins, God,  
who could stand before you?  
But with you is forgiveness,  
and for this we revere you.*

*So I wait for you, God –  
my soul waits,  
and in your word I place my trust.”*

I love that we can develop a deeper sense of reverence (awe) through our continued experiences of forgiveness, grace.

May we actively wait for God in experiences of that forgiving, sustaining presence in that immeasurable Love – that Love that we trust in.

I'd like to close with a devotion that feels like a blessing. I experienced it yesterday. It comes from a book by Kate Bowler [who also wrote *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I've Loved)*]. This book is called *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day! Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs & In-Betweens*. I bring us toward a close with this beautifully loving devotion and prayer. I welcome you to close your eyes if that helps you to take it in.

*“God, lead me*

*Over and over Jesus says, ‘Follow me.’ But I’m not a natural follower. In fact, I would like there to be a separate moving walkway in the airport for people like me, who lose their ever-living minds if they have to break their gait while power walking. I would prefer that God catch me while I’m in a dead spring, now that we’re talking about it.*

*Other times I am hardly going anywhere at all. Some manner of undoing has dismantled all my plans and the only word I would use to describe myself is stuck. God, how can I follow you if I never seem to be going anywhere?*

*Here’s a little blessing for the moments of too-fast and the moments of too-slow. May we learn what it means to follow somehow.*

*God, go and I will follow.*

*Because, truly, I cannot lead.*

*I cannot drag myself forward, chin up and eyes on the horizon, when all I see is the mud caking around my feet.*

*God, go and grace will follow. I've seen it all before. How in the smallest moments, the tiniest efforts multiply in your wake.*

*We've seen the sun rise over an empty tomb and life spring up from nothing but dust, so, all things considered, I suppose I should finally believe that you could do a lot with this day, my life, and these weary limbs, and learn to follow the God who goes first."*

Amen to that. And may we challenge and encourage one another in our journeys toward clarity of purpose in our longing to give ourselves in ways that will build the beloved community in both our private and public spheres – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

August 11, 2024  
St. Croix United Church @ People's Park  
Psalm 130, Ephesians 4:25-5:2