

Sermon for August 12, 2012

St. Anne's Church

Proper 14B

8:30 AM

Text: γίνεσθε οὖν μιμηταὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς τέκνα ἀγαπητὰ
(Ephesians 5:1)

I

“Be imitators of God,” the writer of Ephesians counsels.

Did he or she expect us to understand? The expression feels foolish at first, a bit of a lazy image that a more gifted writer than ours (perhaps like Paul himself) might have improved. Adding the words, “As beloved children,” doesn’t clarify things much either, does it? Yet our unknown author has written these words as an early summary of what it means to live like a Christian. So we must look again.

II

One afternoon during a seminar with my teacher and Doktorvater W. D. Davies, Dr. Davies suddenly stood up from the table and motioned animatedly for us to join him at the window.

“There, you see,” he almost shouted. We all stumbled to the classroom window to see what had excited the great Welch sage.

All I could see was Broadway between 121st and 122nd Streets, and I felt left out that I could not immediately see what our professor was showing us. The Second Coming, perhaps? Why couldn’t I see anything but people walking, cabs lurching, and the subway emerging from underground? What out there could possibly have anything to do with our study of the Gospel of Mark?

I realized, though, that I wasn’t alone in my confusion. Everyone was looking out the window with a “so-what” expression, wondering what the spectacle below was.

The professor let us stew for a moment and then pointed to someone on the sidewalk across Broadway.

“Do you recognize that man with the beard there?”

We did. Certainly, we did. The man was Rabbi Abraham Heschel of blessed memory on his afternoon constitutional with several students from Jewish Theological Seminary in tow.

“Now,” he continued, “do you see how those young men walking with him?” he inquired.

Well, they were walking on two legs. What was remarkable about that?

“Now look at Rabbi Heschel and then look at the students,” Dr. Davies directed. “Do most young Americans walk like that?”

Then we saw it.

Rabbi Heschel was walking with a pensive gait with his head slightly bowed and his hands behind his back, not an unusual gait for a middle European rabbi, perhaps; but with him walked three American students, heads slightly bowed and hands behind their backs in perfect unconscious imitation of their famous teacher.

“Imitation of the teacher,” Dr. Davies said, “is the principal mode of education in Judaism. Not just an imitation of the teacher’s ideas or even the teacher’s way of speaking but the transformation of the student into the physical and mental mirror of his master.

I know that from first-hand experience. I haven’t had my students look out the window to illustrate a point, but I have found myself using phrases and examples from my own teachers that I recognized only later. Even some of their mannerisms found their way into the stand-up comedy routine we call the lecture. Over the years, many, perhaps most of these mannerisms and illustrations have disappeared; but I couldn’t have invented myself as a university professor without the almost mystical presence of my teachers in my life.

Another example: Learning how to spin an airplane safely was one of the most terrifying parts of my tutorial in powered flight. The instructor nonchalantly would stall the airplane while applying full rudder in the desired direction of the spin and then all of a sudden the world of flight would collapse into a dizzying plunge toward earth. The first few times I tried it, I pulled the airplane toward a stall, pushed the rudder, and then chickened out by releasing all the controls and letting the airplane mush back to normal flight.

“No, you do it like this,” my instructor, Nelson the tormenter remonstrated, and humming a little ditty, he took us through another roller-coaster maneuver.

But this time I “got it,” I knew now how to spin the airplane. Taking the controls once more, I began humming a little tune, and spun the plane correctly and then did it again in the opposite direction. Whatever the explanation, I now know that humming is absolutely necessary for spinning airplanes. Imitation.

III

Our author doesn't leave us ignorant about what imitating God will look like in our lives. Walk in love. Forgive one another, be kind to one another, and be tenderhearted. Give yourself in love as Christ gave himself for you. Imitating God isn't learning theology. It's not believing some things and not believing others. It's not about “us” and “them.” You will know that God is your teacher when you recognize love and tenderness in yourself. Your graduating dissertation will be yourself, given for others as Christ gave himself for you.

I know it seems simplistic, out of touch with the ugly complexity of our world to believe that Christians, even a minority of Christians, who have decided to imitate their master in love and service, could be much more than a tiny, ineffectual witness in Winston-Salem or North Carolina or in the whole world. Change comes through power, doesn't it? Through money? Through military might? The author of Ephesians, however, living in the time of Rome's greatest power, in an era of new money glutting the Mediterranean world, and in the shadow of the world's greatest army still

still believed that forgiveness, tender care, and love were greater than any of these powers. Let me propose that love and tenderness seem sentimental and simplistic because we haven't yet recognized or really tried their world-changing power. Here is a hypothesis: suppose just the smallest minority of folk in Winston-Salem could give themselves over to the imitation of God, to the tender care and constant love that is the divine tutelage. I propose that if we could do that, this community would change radically and for the better. There would be no way for it to stay the same.

Imagine that we decided to learn kindness 24/7. Would children be hungry in our city? Imagine that we committed ourselves to God our savior and teacher so as to forgive others fully, not just people who hurt our feelings, but people who have actually harmed us, who hate us, who want the very worst for us . Would it be possible for the cycle of wrong and retribution to be broken on the altar of God at St. Anne's or at the table of our city council. Nothing prevents these things from happening.

As the beloved children we are, we can know the freedom of being those loving and forgiving imitators who will change the world.

Amen

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11:00 AM

בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר סָגַר אֶת־אֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־נָשְׂאוּ אֶת־יָדָם בְּאֹדְגִי הַמֶּלֶךְ:
"Blessed is the LORD your God, who has shut up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king." (2 Samuel 18:28b FLH)

I

Who puts these things in the lectionary? What are we supposed to learn from this sad tale of betrayal and death the historian writes about in today's lesson? Even the LORD God doesn't find mention in this narrative until the very end where the slaughter of 20,000 Israelites plus the king's own son is supposed to show that the LORD has vindicated David.

Maybe we could chalk all this up to hyperbole if it weren't for the fact that less than 150 miles away from the Iron Age slaughter of 20,000 in the forest of Ephraim, another near eastern ruler is even now destroying his own people in Damascus and Aleppo. It's not hyperbole, it's just old news.

It's old news too that the historian wastes no ink on the anguish and suffering of the 20,000 and their families. The only anguish that counts is that of the very king who had instigated the slaughter, King David, lamenting for his dead son.

There is some comic relief, however sardonic, in the story of Absalom hanging by his hair from the branches of a tree and the debate Joab has with his soldiers about what to do with the hapless wanna-be king, suspended above them. The lectionary, however, protects you from this comedy by omitting most of it.

Old news: a popular revolt against a minority despot, which the despot puts down with shameless cruelty. Old news: Before King David got home, yet another revolt broke out against him. This revolt, however, ended abruptly when the head of the chief instigator of the revolt sailed over the ramparts of Abel of Beth-maacah (אֲבֵל־בֵּית־הַמַּעֲכָה) and fell at the feet of Joab's troops that were besieging the city. At least this time nobody blamed the outcome on the Lord GOD.

II

We've been reading some old news ourselves, haven't we? Not just old news about the Middle East and Afghanistan but old news about North Carolina and Winston-Salem. We lost the battle to bar bigotry against our sisters and brothers in the LGBT community from our state constitution—and we lost big. We also lost a tiny candle of hope against the darkness of racism and death when the Legislature overturned the governor's veto and destroyed the Racial Justice Act. Shall we also hold the Lord God responsible for the beginning of another academic year of education in our community segregated by race and class? Old news, especially if you're my age and remember the former reign of Jim Crow in our state.

Remember the signs that informed us which drinking water was white and which was colored? If not, you're fortunate. Yes, city busses actually did have signs ordering people of color to the rear, and it seemed so perfectly right and natural for all our classmates to look white or black just like us. Can you remember that? We avoided "voter fraud" in those days with poll taxes and literacy tests; but everybody knew why we really had them just as everybody knows today why there is a movement to require picture ID to vote.

I hope you only heard of Jim Crow at school and not at the foot of a burning cross on your lawn. I hope you're young enough not to remember first-hand the restaurant signs that read "We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to Anyone." But if you don't remember, or if you remember only through books and videos, just be assured it really did happen. Be sure of that. Sadly, too, old news has a way of becoming today's news in the blink of an eye.

III

This may sound a little daft, but I find great comfort in the Bible's recitation of the old news, even the horrifying events so clinically sanitized in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. I find it comforting to see the old news there because I live in a world of old news, and my question is not whether I can imagine a fairyland in which the old news dissolves into a new world in Walt Disney Technicolor. I can. What I have a hard time imagining is that the old news I inhabit outside the movie theater lives under the loving care of any God at all. It's hard to believe that it still matters what happens and where we stand. It's hard and it's our confession: in the divine economy even tyranny of the worst despot and bigotry of the worst racist is not all the news there is.

All the sinful messiness of David's monarchy and those that followed it is available to us openly in the pages of the Bible's history. All of the rottenness of pampered young courtiers and arrogant dictators is there to read, as is all of the rottenness of my life. Still, we dare read about that rottenness and even proclaim it "the word of the Lord." Why? How? Perhaps we can do this because we can hope against hope and believe

beyond the believable that this “word of the Lord” is not God’s last word to us about who we are and who God is.

Yes, it’s old news that money buys elections and that heaps of unregulated, undocumented cash might buy many elections. That’s old news. But here’s some additional news: It is perfectly possible for you to resist the despotic rule of riches. We can take with complete seriousness the threat of the new campaign corruption and our chances of doing anything about it because the Bible can do so and because the Bible doesn’t stop there, urging us on with the surprising promise that “I have overcome the world.” That includes the world of “Citizens United.”

The new upswing in segregation and the public harassment of so-called “non-traditional” families is old news, really old news. I have no idea what the chances are that these things will change much in my lifetime or yours. But the new racism and the new bigotry are not God’s last word even for those who support these things. The old news is there. We’re living it, and yet we dare hope, must hope, and will hope that in God’s mercy our old news will be swallowed up in God’s eternal good news.

Amen