

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

"Now this I say and testify in the Lord ... Be imitators of God" (Ephesians 4:17a, 5:1).

Humans are mimetic creatures. That is, we imitate one another. Starting from your own family, you may have noticed that we tend to imitate one another. Children imitate their parents' speech patterns. They even imitate those words that their parents say they have never said. Children imitate the way their parents walk. Children imitate what their parents find most important. They imitate their parents' choice in favorite sports team, favorite college, favorite foods, favorite color. Even into adulthood, children imitate their parents for better or for worse.

Wise Solomon speaks of children imitating their parents. He says in Proverbs 22: ***"Train a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it"*** (Proverbs 22:6).

And as I've mentioned in a past sermon, country singer Rodney Atkins sings about this imitation in his song "Watching You." He sang:

*"Well then my four-year-old said a four letter word
That started with 's' and I was concerned
So I said, 'Son, now where did you learn to talk like that?'"*

*"He said, 'I've been watching you dad, ain't that cool
I'm your buckaroo, I wanna be like you ... so I've been watching you.'"*

For better or for worse, we mimic one another. So, as adults, we must pay attention to what we are teaching the younger generation. They are watching us. Later in that song, Rodney Atkins sang:

*"[My son] crawled out of bed and he got down on his knees
He closed his little eyes, folded his little hands
And spoke to God like he was talking to a friend
And I said, 'Son, now where'd you learn to pray like that?'"*

"He said, 'I've been watching you dad, ain't that cool"

I'm your buckaroo, I wanna be like you ... so I've been watching you.'"

This imitation does not just correspond with parents. Just think about regional intricacies and accents. Why is it that it takes several goodbyes for a Midwestern goodbye? Why is it that people in Boston all sound alike? Or New York? What about that southern drawl?

Speaking of accents, it is often that other people hear things that we don't hear. Often, we don't hear our own accent. To us, we sound normal. Even when you may move to a new area, you will likely begin to talk like the people that you hear talk all around you. We eventually take on the accents of the people that we listen to.

As Christians, we certainly speak with a definite accent. St. Paul admits that. He says that as Christians, we imitate each other by doing honest work with our own hands. We help the poor and needy. We speak what is good, right, and salutary, which is for the building up of each other. We forgive one another. We give of our firstfruits to God in giving thanks for all He has given us – our daily bread: food, clothing, and shelter. And even more: our salvation by grace through faith in His only begotten Son Jesus Christ, our Lord. Now, we may not notice this, and that may be good. Since it is typical that we think that's just normal. But to the fallen world all around us, they notice it. They hear our particular accent. They notice that Christians have a particular accent.

So, as Christians, we are able to imitate one another. But how can we be imitators of God?

How could anyone imitate God? That just seems absurd! Man cannot imitate God! How can we create life out of nothing? How can we equal Jesus' saving deeds?

Remember when our first parents were coerced by that serpent to have the desire to be like God? What happened to them? They saw that the tree in the midst of the garden was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, so Adam and Eve took of its fruit and ate (Genesis 3). As soon as Adam and Eve disobeyed God by seeing that the fruit that God told them *not to eat* as pleasing, they sinned, and humanity has dealt with those consequences ever since as our fallen nature wants nothing to do with the one true God. We lost the image of God. We lost the ability to imitate God. Or so we thought. So, how could we regain the ability to imitate God?

In our epistle, St. Paul gives us some pointers. First, he teaches us the opposite: how not to imitate God. Paul tells of the Gentiles. Now, he's not just speaking of those people who are not Jews by blood. He is speaking of heathens – how the people of the fallen world live, who do not have the right faith. Paul says to not be like them in following the futility of their minds. He is speaking of minds, because it is the mind that is the source of all evil behavior. You see, we first think about the sin that we are going to do. So, in this way, Paul is warning the Ephesians and us today against falling back into our old ways that would lead us away from faith in Christ and back into pagan beliefs.

So, there is a danger in backsliding into sin. This is why we must imitate what is good and not imitate what is dangerous.

In our text, St. Paul writes, ***“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. ... Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear”*** (Ephesians 4:26, 29).

So, how can we be both angry and not sin? What is Paul talking about? Is he speaking about righteous anger, just as when God is angry with His sinful people, as if Paul were saying, *“Be angry in such a way that you do not sin?”* How could a person be angry and also not sin? After all, anger is violating the Fifth Commandment: You shall not murder. So, what is Paul talking about?

Martin Luther puts it this way: *“Paul is taking into consideration the way of the world. Men are tempted and moved to anger. ... But right here, says the apostle, you should beware and not sin; not give reign, nor yield to the impulse and promptings of wrath. ... Beware of doing what your wrath would have you do.”*

Putting everything in context, there is a heightened meaning to Paul's words: Christians are to daily return to Baptism through repentance and forgiveness. You see, as soon as you were Baptized into Christ's death and resurrection for the forgiveness of your sins, Satan put a target on your back. He will do anything to destroy you and me. He wants us angry. He wants us to follow the futility of our minds. He wants us to be confused over what is good. He wants our minds perverted. He wants disorder. He wants us ***“tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes”*** (Ephesians 4:14). Satan doesn't want you here today. Satan doesn't want you to be inundated in the language of forgiveness.

St. Paul speaks about the language of learning. Just as it is best to learn a foreign language through immersion, the Divine Service is an immersion experience. So, the Divine Service is a time for us to work on our language skills. And the consequence of this learning is the fear of the Lord. Proverbs 1:7 says, ***“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”*** Here in the Divine Service, the triune God comes to us through His Means of Grace, His Word and Sacraments, so that we can better know Him, so that we can have a proper relationship with Him. Here, we become disciples, which literally means, “the one who learns.”

Disciples of Christ are made by teaching and baptizing. To learn Christ is to become Christlike, particularly in bearing the cross. It involves a renunciation of the world. A renunciation of all that is evil and Satanic. We should have nothing to do with evil, and where we see evil, we are to renounce it. We are to ***“put away falsehood”*** (Ephesians 4:25) and have nothing to do with it.

Just as Paul points the Ephesians back to catechesis, he does the same for us. You see, it is through catechesis, or teaching, that we come to know Christ and the Gospel, and to your Baptism, where you were placed into Christ and made Christlike. So, going back to my question: *how can we become imitators of God?* On our own we can't, since we are poor, miserable, sinners, who desire nothing that God wills. But through the working of the Holy Spirit through Baptism and through right teaching in regular attendance in the Divine Service, we can! This is the place where we learn how to imitate God. Here, we learn how to speak in a way that builds up. Even when we speak hard truths, we speak it in a way that builds up. We speak in a way that gives grace, with a gracious accent.

This is the place where we are being built up. This is the place where we hear and practice forgiveness at every Divine Service. This is the place where we learn how to imitate Christ. And imitation is doing. Our imitating actions are the result of our new life in Christ, as we learn about His love for you in that while we were still sinners, He died for you, so that you would have forgiveness, life, and salvation. And here, we are empowered to be like Him through His Word and Sacraments, knowing that our sins are forgiven thus we forgive one another, just as He has forgiven us. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +