



SUNDAY SERMON

Imitators of God

This week as I've been thinking about the gift and the challenge of being identified as a Christian in today's world, the refrain of a familiar hymn has played in my head: And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

While no religion has an exclusive claim on the love of God, I like the way this hymn affirms and celebrates what it means to know and reveal oneself as Christian. In order for the church to show forth love on the outside, it needs to be united in love on the inside. If we dwell together in love, those we encounter outside the church will see and feel it.

As Pope Francis has put it, "love is the Christian's identity card, the only valid document identifying us as Christians. If this card expires and is not constantly renewed, we stop being (Jesus') witnesses."* Christian love is our caring response to the brokenness we see among us. It is also our insistent and sometimes indignant response to the evil and injustice that inflict pain and violence in the world.

Christian love will be affirmed today at an interfaith gathering near the national Mall. While the Unite the Right rally spews a racist message of hate and division, the United in Love rally will proclaim our commitment to God's inclusive vision of love and equality. Members of this parish will join that gathering, and our ongoing work for justice remains vital to our identity as Christians.

Where do we get the love that will be brought to that rally today? Many non-religious people are committed to helping others and working for justice. The love we bring has an added dimension because it unfolds from our story of faith. And in order for it to be as robust and far-reaching as God needs it to be, we must keep coming back to the setting where it's nurtured.

Or, to use the pope's metaphor, we have to constantly renew our Christian love card. I wish this was as easy as renewing a driver's license or a library card! Living as members of God's household is a mission that needs constant tending. How do we do this and make this a community of love?

That seems to be the question being answered in the Epistle to the Ephesians. This ancient community is passionately committed to the Jesus movement, yet divided and beleaguered as a small sect in an often hostile culture. In effect, they're asking: how can we renew our Christian love cards, and get along as God's people in order to be Jesus' witnesses?

The answer they receive is testimony about why Christian identity matters. It is as challenging for followers of Jesus as it is for all people to be gracious, truthful, forgiving and generous. But we can make these qualities part of who we are because we have the advantage of not having to do it alone. We are linked to Christ and to one another through baptism.

Continued

DATE

Twelfth Sunday after
Pentecost
Sunday, August 12, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. David Griswold

VERSES

Ephesians 4: 25- 5:2;
John 6: 35, 41-51

The Ephesians are reminded that in allowing faith to shape their identities, their relationships will be guided not by the limitations of human goodness but by the boundless promise of God's goodness. The message culminates in advice that must have brought them up short just as it does us: "therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us" (5:1-2).

Imitators of God? How could we ever be loving, patient or steadfast enough to imitate God? The idea seems at once presumptuous and futile.

Yet as this writer knows, imitation is part of how children grow. From an early age, we imitate those we know and trust, often adopting their behavior and world-view. Today's epistle itself may have been written by a student of Paul, seeking to imitate and spread Paul's teaching. We emulate our elders whether they want us to or not. Their joys and strengths, fears and foibles and sometimes their mistakes become part of who we are.

We want God to be part of who we are. But it seems more natural for us to imitate others around us than to imitate God. In today's gospel story, Jesus reveals himself to be the true imitator of God, but no one can comprehend it. He declares "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." Jesus is telling us that by taking him in, and doing as he does and says, we too can be imitators of God.

But those who challenge Jesus grumble at this scandalous claim. They know that children imitate their parents: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" He comes from Nazareth, not heaven. He is the carpenter's son. The idea that Jesus was sent to imitate our heavenly parent, to model God's love for us, is beyond their view of reality.

Even though we may understand Jesus better than these critics do, we still struggle like the Ephesians to make his love part of our identity. We worry that the impulse to love in this way doesn't seem to come naturally. The answer for the Ephesians and for us is, don't fret that it doesn't come naturally. Start as children, by imitating.

Through decades of trying to discern whether and how to make God more present in my life, I've learned I can't be a child of God on my own. For years, I sought to know God by attending church and reading about God without making more time in my life and more room in my heart for the deeper connections church life can bring.

But I gradually paid closer attention to people whose lives seemed to be richer for being part of a God-imitating community. I began to see and feel the qualities of our relational God around me in the words, actions and choices of fellow church folk. Their patience, generosity, kindness, compassion, humility and outwardly-directed energy gave me glimpses of God's love. They were also a lot of fun to be around. I saw, as today's epistle says, that we are "members of one another" (4: 25). And I began to be more intentional about trying to imitate God in my own life.

When I came to St. Columba's I wondered: can a parish of this size feel like a community of love? How, I wondered, could a place with such a large membership bring people close enough together to recognize that we are members of one another? How can my Christian love card get renewed here?

The answer I've found is the same as before: imitate those who are doing it. I've come to see us as people who, knowing we are blessed with God's love, want to be agents of that love in our families, at work and school, and in the world, and we need this community to help draw it from us.

We might have differing temperaments and styles of relating, but all our Christian love cards get renewed here. The St. Columba's community is crowded and yet intimate, bustling and yet calm, striving ardently for God's justice and yet waiting expectantly for God's companionship; engaging the faith with our minds and yet cherishing its truth with our hearts.

Continued

Whether we're long time members or newcomers, this community embraces us in God's presence during all of life's transitions, celebrating our blessings and helping shoulder our setbacks. It's a community in which we know it is safe to share our doubts and questions about faith and to affirm the insights and growth that faith brings to us. It offers us practices and programs to help us be imitators of God and get closer to one another at whatever pace feels right.

Here we learn the truth of the saying: "church happens not only in rows, but in circles." Large or small, within these walls or beyond, on Sunday or any day, whenever we gather in circles of two or more, we discover that in Jesus we are members of one another. The opportunities to renew our Christian love cards are as limitless as the number of circles that God's Spirit is forming and re-forming among us and between us and others in the wider world.

And as we continue to learn from one another what it means to imitate God, those who encounter us as Christians will indeed know us by our love.

Amen.