



*Kindness, Tenderheartedness, Forgiveness: Be Imitators Of God*

*A sermon on Ephesians 4:25-5:2*

Sunday, August 12th, 2018 ~ 12th Sunday after Pentecost

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

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[Guilt] Monarch butterflies are beautifully colored creatures with rich oranges, dark blacks, and brilliant whites covering their bodies. Their coloration is not designed to attract attention. It is intended to be a warning system, telling other animals “Don’t eat me. I’m not good for you.” As caterpillars, monarchs only source of food is the plant, milkweed. Milkweed is what makes them toxic to eat. If an animal does eat a monarch butterfly they won’t die, but they will be sick enough not to do it again. So they are both beautiful and poisonous. Nature is very clever. There is another butterfly who’s got the monarch figured out. It is the viceroy butterfly. The viceroy has the same color scheme as the monarch: orange, black, and white. In fact, the viceroy imitates the monarch so well it’s often confused by people as being the same butterfly. Because it is so good at mimicking the monarch, animals won’t eat it because they mistakenly think it is poisonous. The viceroy uses imitation to protect itself from predators. How intelligent is that? Imitation is found throughout all of creation. The scarlet king snake uses a color band pattern like the coral snake to confuse other animals. The Boquila Trifoliolata vine can change the size, shape, and color of its leaves to match the plant it is growing on. The Jawfish mimics the color of an octopus. It swims and wriggles like one of its tentacle. Imitation is all around in the created order.

We see imitation everyday. Walk into any grocery store and you’ll find all kinds of mimics, copycats. Take, for example, maple flavored syrup, or artificially flavored chocolate, or, in my mind, the worse imitator at the store, absolutely the worse... turkey bacon. Turkey is never bacon. Only Bacon is bacon. The two cannot be confused. So not only is turkey bacon a poor knockoff, it is also a misnomer. Imitation doesn’t just exist in nature and the grocery store. Imitation is also something we do. When we arrive to a meeting and someone takes out their phone and silences it, we pull out our phone and double check it. When we’re having coffee with a friend and they take a sip, we mirror them and take a drink. When a person yawns, it triggers other people to yawn. We also say things like “groovy, fresh, or extra” because we are copying other people. We try to do the “cinnamon challenge” that is where you attempt to eat a tablespoons of cinnamon without taking a drink of water, because we see someone else do it. We imitate other people all the time, not always to our benefit.

The trouble is, as Christians, we aren't supposed to imitate the world. We are, as verse one says, "to be imitators of God" but we live in a broken world. We are a broken people. Our hearts are much more inclined to sin than they are to God. So, rather than imitating God, being tenderhearted towards other people, and loving everyone as Jesus loves us, we mimic the things we see and hear. In doing so, we cocoon ourselves with self interest, material goods, and vanity. We guard our "free time" like a junkyard watchdog and refrain from sharing our time with people in need. We work our fingers to the bone, or someone else's, so that we can retire and "take it easy." We spend ridiculously sums of money on clothing, shoes, and watches, because other people do and we want to be like them. Mimicking the world highlights our brokenness and keeps us from thinking, speaking, and doing what God has commanded us.

[Grace] Even though we are broken by sin and, we, regularly imitate the world rather than God, God is still gracious with us. God has not left us entangled in our brokenness, struggling to break free from the copycat casing that has entrapped us. In verse two, we hear what is at the heart of the gospel, Jesus so loves us that he gave himself up for us. Jesus was crucified on a cross for us. In doing so, he won victory over death and sin. We are no longer chained to self interest, material goods, and vanity. We have been set free from them. God's grace did not stop there. Verse 32, God in Jesus has forgiven us. Jesus took from us our sins, carried them upon his back, and gave to us his righteousness, but God's grace doesn't stop there either. Verse 30, "you have been marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit." That is to say, we have not been left, here on earth, alone. The Holy Spirit is among us, guiding us, and instructing us in ways of righteousness. God's grace knows no bounds. It is limitless. It is irresistible. Because of God's graciousness we have been transformed. The old life of imitating worldly things has gone and a new life has begun.

[Gratitude] Since we have been given God's grace, God's unmerited love, which forgives and transforms us, we have responsibilities. Chief among them is, putting aside our copying of the world and choose to imitate God. What does it look like to imitate God? For starters, we are to be kind to one another. At VBS the children get all sorts of neat trinkets. Just after VBS had ended on Wednesday night a young girl walked up to Mrs. Jessica and I. She told us her little brother had lost his Bible memory buddy Guac, an iguana, and how she gave hers to her little brother. Something like that might not be a big deal to you and me, but to a child it is a big deal. That little girl selflessly gave her Bible memory buddy to her brother, and in doing so she showed kindness to her brother, in the same way we have been charged to do in verse 32 of the fifth chapter of Ephesians.

To imitate God is also to be tenderhearted. A friend of mine recently told me of how one of her friends, Bobbi, was losing her eyesight. They lived down the hall from one another in the retirement community. They developed a plan so that Bobbi could get around. Nancy would walk one step in front of Bobbi, allowing Bobbi to put one hand on her shoulder and follow

her. They walked everywhere together. To break fast, lunch, and dinner. To the courtyard and everywhere in between. Their pace was slow but they always got to where they were going. Nancy didn't have to walk with Bobbi, but Nancy's heart wells with compassion. She is selfless, caring for her friend and showing us the meaning of tenderheartedness.

To imitate God is also to "forgive one another." (vs. 32) This is often the most difficult thing for us to do, when it comes to imitating God. Why? Because we, like God, have memories. We don't quickly forget when someone does us wrong. Christian forgiveness does not mean that we overlook the wrong done to us, or act as if it didn't happen. Forgiveness is something beyond forgetfulness. Forgiveness is an ongoing process. One by which we actively work to change our attitude, little by little, towards those who have harmed us, promising not to do to them what they have done to us. More than that, forgiveness is something we deal with, first and foremost, with God. Our relationship with God, built on what God does for us in grace, is the primary thing in forgiveness. To forgive is to restore our relationship with God and then with others.

[Conclusion] Animals mimic one another. Some plants change to look like another plant. Some people think turkey bacon is bacon, but really is just a bad, want-to-be, copycat. We imitate other people. We say things that they say. We do what they do because we are a broken people. Despite our brokenness God loves us, has forgiven us, and sealed us with the Holy Spirit. Our response to God's graciousness is to imitate God. We are to be kind to one another. We are to be tenderhearted. We are to forgive each other.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.