

SERMON: Imitators of God

TEXT: Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

Back to school! Here are three words that you've probably heard more times than you can count in the last few weeks. Back to school has become a season in itself. In between summer and fall, there's "back to school." And even though many of us here are not affected, we know it's happening, and we know what it's like. Or, at least, what it used to be like.

I remember when my son was going into middle school. He would be riding the bus for the first time, changing classrooms and teachers every hour of the day, he would have a locker and a combination that he had to remember. On top of all this, he was very shy and not a big fan of change. He was awake nearly all night before middle school started. He got maybe an hour or two of sleep. I hated to wake him up that day. And then, knowing how tired and scared he was, I wanted so badly to drive him to school. But I knew that was a bad idea. I practically had to push him out the door of the house. As I watched him walk down the street to the bus stop, I could tell that he was crying. By that point, I was, too.

In the past couple of weeks I've seen several news stories and articles about how schools and teachers and parents are preparing for students coming back to

school. Some of these stories are about safety and the changes many administrators have made to keep their schools safer. Children are afraid to go back to school – not so much because they have to ride the bus for the first time or remember a locker combination. Today, children are afraid to go to school because that’s where children get shot.

Teachers at Marshall County High School in Kentucky, where a shooting took place last year, were preparing for the new year by writing hundreds of encouraging notes for all students to randomly put in lockers throughout the year. The notes had messages like, “You are awesome,” “you are loved,” “don’t give up,” “keep smiling,” etc. The hope is to lighten the burden or bring a smile to a kid who’s having a rough day or who feels left out.

I also saw a video on Facebook about two middle school students in Seattle, Belle and Abby, who made it a practice to greet every person who came into school every day. These girls arrived early so they could hold the doors open when others arrived. They smiled and said “Good morning” to every kid. Every kid. The popular and the not-so-popular, the brains and the jocks and the band kids, the bright outgoing students, the shy withdrawn students, too. They handed out compliments and high fives and told fellow students to have a great day. On

the last day of school, Belle and Abby stood with all the teachers are waved goodbye to everyone as the buses drove away. The reporter ended the story with, “And that, my friends, is how the world becomes a better place.”

From Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we read the admonition to “be imitators of God.” When you put it like that, it feels like a daunting, heavy, impossible task. I mean, we could make this our primary purpose, our reason for living every moment of every day for the rest of our lives and still look like a child playing a game of pretend. A super hero in pajamas wearing a bath towel as a cape. But we are not super heroes. We are not all-knowing or all-powerful. It is not up to us to decide who will sit at the Lord’s right hand in heaven. It is not our job to divide the sheep and goats. Neither judgment nor wrath nor vengeance belongs to us.

Furthermore, notice that none of these things are mentioned by Paul as the ways in which we are to imitate God. Let’s hear his words again.

“So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so

as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Promote what you love instead of bashing what you hate. You can attract more flies with honey than with vinegar. “Accentuate the positive; eliminate the negative,” as my mother used to sing, as she quoted an old song. Of course, she was talking about how I should choose my style of clothing, but that’s another story!

Years ago, I received a brochure that listed all of the assets children need to become strong, healthy, happy, and self-confident adults. One of the things I learned that I’ll never forget was that it takes ten positive statements to outweigh one negative statement spoken to a child. When you think about it, I have a feeling

it's also true for adults. It's easy to remember all the bad things people say to us, or about us. Our brains are like armored trucks, keeping the negatives safe and secure for all time, while all the positive things fly through as if it's an open air market.

I heard an interview with a man named Daryl Davis. He is a black musician who has converted over 200 white supremacists by befriending them, talking with them, getting to know them, trying to understand them. He says, "I don't seek to convert them, but if they spend time with me they can't hate me." He also says, "As long as we're talking, we're not fighting." On this first anniversary of the race riot in Charlottesville, Virginia, we need to see that there is another way.

Something else that's been in the news a lot lately is Fred Rogers, as it is the 50th anniversary of his television show, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. The documentary about him called, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* is a hit in theaters. The wonderful thing about Mr. Rogers was his gentleness, his kindness, his authentic love and respect for everyone. (By the way, he was also a Presbyterian minister!) In a time of extreme racial tension, where people were literally chasing black people from swimming pools, Mr. Rogers dipped his tired feet in a kiddie pool and invited his black friend to join him. He showed such great respect for

children; he didn't talk down to them, he listened to them and showed them that their thoughts and feelings were important. He talked to them about difficult issues like death, war, illness, and disability.

People have been so moved by the documentary. I think we are hungry to see such genuine love and respect, such kindness. He didn't have to preach about God. He was a true IMITATOR OF GOD. We need more people like Mr. Rogers today.

I found a website - SpreadKindness.org. It is a non-profit organization dedicated to encouraging and empowering people to practice kindness in their everyday lives. [They] provide individuals and groups with tools, ideas, projects and events that help make the world a kinder place.

It seems so simple, almost too simple. Which makes it all the more puzzling and disturbing that we need reminders to be kind to one another. Perhaps we all need to go back to school, in a sense. We need to keep learning over and over again to build each other up rather than tear each other down.

Through kindness, we can make the world a better place. Through kindness, we can be IMITATORS OF GOD. May every deed we do and every word we speak be for the honor and glory of God!

AMEN.