

SERMON: Imitators of God
TEXT: Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

8-8-21

I saw a video on Facebook this week showing a little girl about 3 or four years old watching the Olympics. Specifically, it was the gold medal winning floor routine of American gymnast Suni Lee, and the little girl was imitating every move in the middle of her living room. When Suni would spin around on one foot, the little girl would do her best spin. When Suni hopped across the mat and kicked her legs up high, the little girl would do the same. When Suni ran as fast as she could and did several flips in a row, the little girl would run a couple of steps and then do a summersault. And when Suni stuck the landing and stood straight and tall with her arms in the air, the little girl mimicked her proud finish.

I don't remember dancing around the room like that, but I was also mesmerized by the gymnasts in the Summer Games and the figure skaters in the Winter Games when I was young. Any dreams I had about following in their footsteps, though, quickly faded when I realized I would have to get up off the couch! I did, however, sport a lovely Dorothy Hamill haircut in the late 1970's!

I know it's meant to be inspiring, but I think it's misleading when people say, "If you can dream it, you can do it." Not true. There's a whole lot more

involved than just dreaming. The statement says nothing about how hard you have to work, how much of yourself you have to give, how much sacrifice it requires to make your dream come true.

And then we read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, his admonition to IMITATORS OF GOD. This ranks right up there with Jesus' words in his Sermon on the Mount from Matthew: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

(Matthew 5:48) He was teaching about loving your enemies, and if there's any area in which we will never reach perfection, it's this one.

We're only human, after all. This is our best excuse for getting out of such a daunting, heavy, impossible task. Perfect, like our heavenly Father is perfect? It's not going to happen. So, why even try?

But let's not give up that quickly. Let's look again at what, specifically, Paul is expecting of Christians from all times and places.

“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.”

First, it is important to note the reason for speaking the truth, the reason for taking on this way of life. “We are members of one another.” As Christians, as the church, we become a family of sorts. Like team USA, there are high expectations. Expectations of performance, of course. But more than that, there are expectations for life together. More than a list of rules, this passage paints a picture of what the

Christian life is like, and how we can best get along with one another. Without truth, for instance, there can be no trust, and we have to be able to trust one another as we follow Christ.

One commentary emphasized the fact that Paul is writing to new Christians, telling them to put away the old life and take on the new. “Because we are reborn, the habits of the old self have no dominion over us. The Holy Spirit enables the baptized to put off the *evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God* as well as giving inclination and will *to put your whole trust in [Jesus Christ’s] grace and love.*” This theologian then gives three reasons for following in these ways.

“First, we are a new creation... Once the baptized person puts on the new white garment, the old clothes are cast away. In like manner, Paul is calling for the new Christians to remember who they are now in Christ and to focus on the way to life, instead of turning back to the ways of death.... Second, we are now part of the body of Christ, and that membership gives us strength to do what is set before us. As part of this body, we encourage one another and help one another to live out our baptismal promises.... We all are in this enterprise of being church together...Paul is

calling for these early Christians not merely to worship God in Christ, but through the Holy Spirit to imitate Christ in their own behavior, for the sake of Christ's church and for the sake of the world... Finally, Paul calls upon them not to *grieve the Holy Spirit of God*... We do not wish to do anything to grieve God, because of our love for God in Christ. Therefore, we joyfully turn toward those acts that bring God joy and away from those that do not, because our individual and corporate focus is to serve Christ by pleasing him.” (G. Porter Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3)

Of course, just like becoming an Olympic athlete, the marks of our new life do not appear out of nowhere. There was a teenager I knew in Iowa who was an exceptional piano player. Once after attending her recital, I commented on how much talent she had, adding that I was envious of her. She apparently had heard similar remarks before because her answer to me was immediate. “I work really hard,” she countered. Though she may have had some natural inclination for her musical ability, she was quick to clarify that it takes practice, discipline, hard work, and a singular focus. Like an athlete training for the Olympics, she needed to eat, sleep, and breathe her talent in order to become exceptional.

In the words of Martin Luther, “This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.”

“Therefore be IMITATORS OF GOD, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” Let this be our goal, to the glory of God!

AMEN.