

“Live in Love”

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

If it is true that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” then the professors at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia must have been very flattered by what they experienced on Fastnacht, the annual celebration that occurred on what is also known as Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. “Fastnacht” is a Pennsylvania Dutch celebration that includes the eating of pastries also known as “fastnachts,” which are a bit heavier and denser than donuts and not as sweet. It is a traditional way of using up the fat in one’s household (as others do by making pancakes) before the Lenten fast begins on Ash Wednesday. At the seminary, Fastnacht was tradition the day of the student talent show, when we would put on a variety of skits that often featured an imitation of faculty members in a variety of settings. There were a few faculty members who were also the subject of imitation; Dr. Robert Bornemann was so frequently imitated that one year we called a moratorium to allow other faculty members equal time. While there would be skits that did not involve our professors (we once staged a talk show that included various biblical characters), it was the imitations of professors that were always the highlight of the shows, and faculty members would all attend to see if they were in the spotlight that year. One faculty member who had not been included for many years was Dr. Lyman Lundein, our professor of systematic theology. Because Dr. Lundein was a tall man of Scandinavian heritage, my classmates encouraged me to try out an imitation of him. After a lot of practice that included carefully listening to his style of speech and watching his mannerisms in class, I got up on Fastnacht and gave a lecture that included a sales pitch for “Lyman Lundein’s Kit for Theologians.” Not only was my presentation a hit, but I got a big hug afterwards from both Dr. Lundein and his wife, who said it was an honour to finally be included in Fastnacht.

While our imitations of professors at Fastnacht were all in fun, there were many ways in which we imitated them in real life, along with persons who became our mentors and role models. For me, I have always pointed to three people who have been the persons I have imitated both consciously and unconsciously in the many years of my ordained ministry. While my focus has not been on their speech patterns

or mannerisms, they have been my role models in how I might follow their example of faithful service as a pastor, teacher, and mentor. They have been the persons whose example has shaped my life and for whom I continue to give thanks.

Each of us has persons who have been our role models, persons who we have shaped our lives through imitating what we experienced by living with them. The way we talk, the customs and traditions that have been passed on to us, the ways in which we unconsciously follow their example are all ways in which we become imitators of these important persons. They may have been parents or other family members, teachers or other adult leaders, coaches, theatre directors, or other adults who offered themselves as an example for us to follow. Such role models are also important in our faith formation as Christians; in Holy Baptism, we charge the adults who bring their children to receive this blessed sacrament to be their role models, their teachers and mentors in the faith, as they *“teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer, so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace”* (ELW Holy Baptism). Martin Luther wrote the *Small Catechism* so that parents and adult family members might teach their children both through word and example what it means to live as a Christian so that their children might become imitators of their example of serving all people, following the example of their mentors and role models in the Christian faith.

In the second half of his letter to the Ephesians in which Paul teaches the Christians in the churches of this city in Asia Minor what it means to live as a baptized child of God and a member of the church which is the Body of Christ, the Apostle shifts his focus to a series of short exhortations (*sententiae*) that describe both vices to be avoided and virtues to be cultivated. Each exhortation describes what is to be done and provides a reason for such conduct. Paul contrasts the behavior patterns that belong to the “old self” that existed before one was adopted as a child of God with the “new self” that is now united with Christ. Paul gives particular attention to conduct that can either build up or tear apart unity within the faith community. Paul bases his moral guidance on Old Testament teachings as well as our connection to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ through baptism; these realities have important implications for the way we live as God’s people in our everyday lives.

- What we have here are radical blueprints for an utterly transformed pattern of human relations that the author calls ‘one new humanity.’ This unprecedented social reality, brought into being through Christ’s death and resurrection, has shattered the wall that has long divided Jew from Gentile, and defies taken-

for-granted social norms. At 4:25, the writer begins addressing a pressing question: what are the habits that we must abandon and the practices that we need to embrace to experience this ‘new humanity’?” – Sally A. Brown.

Paul begins his exhortations by encouraging his readers, those who “*clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*” (4:24), that “*putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.*” (4:25). Truthful speech is to replace lying because of the corporate nature of Christian life; it is a continuation of Paul’s earlier teaching for the faith community that “*speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love*” (4:15-16). It is in keeping with Paul’s teaching in his letter to the Romans that “*as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.*” (Romans 12:4-5). Those who are one in Christ are to follow the prophet’s instructions to “*speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace*” (Zechariah 8:16). Being united in Christ also means that God’s people are to be taught to “*be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil*” (4:26-27). Paul’s words recall the teaching of Psalm 4:4: “*When you are angry, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent.*” This teaching recognizes the distinction between the emotions of anger, for which we may not be responsible, and what we do with it. The teaching “*do not let the sun go down on your anger*” recalls Jesus’ teaching on how his followers are to resolve disputes with others within the faith community:

- “Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.” – Luke 17:3-4.

If such reconciliation is not possible, do not hold on to your anger; surrender it to the Lord so that you “*do not make room for the devil.*” This teaching echoes Jesus’ warning in the Sermon on the Mount that “*if you are angry with your brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.*” (Matthew 5:22). The amendment of life that is to follow from one’s baptism into Christ also includes living according to the commandment that “*you shall not steal*”

(Exodus 20:15), which for Paul means that “*thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy*” (4:28). Paul’s original words can be translated “*Let the one who steals steal no more,*” which can include several forms of fraud that in our modern context may include stealing items for our place of work, cheating on taxes, and downloading items from the internet without paying. The alternative to such dishonest living, which is to “*labour and work honestly with their own hands,*” was established by Paul’s own example:

- “Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.” – 2 Thessalonians 3:6-9.

The need to engage in manual labour describes the majority of believers to whom Paul addresses his letter. They are to provide for themselves and others rather than weak to live off the largess of wealthy patrons; their labour is not only for the sake of supporting their own families, but also to :*have something to share with the needy,*” which was an aspect of Paul’s teaching to the Ephesians that is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles: “*In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remember the words of the Lord Jesus, for himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’*” (Acts 20:35).

- “Thus this advice ensures the respectable behavior of Christians who are not among the elite and whose affiliation with the new religious movement might render them suspect.” – Pheme Perkins.

Paul returns to the opening theme of this passage when he cautions his readers to “*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 them*” (4:29). Such “evil talk” (*sapros*, literally “rotten”) is not merely vulgarity but any harmful speech that can poison relationships. Concern for what one says is commonplace in Old Testament Wisdom literature (“*The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but the perverse tongue will be cut off*” – Proverbs 10:31). Instead of engaging in such destructive talk, Christians are to speak in a way that is “*useful for building up,*” talk that responds to people’s needs and that allows them to “impart grace,” so

that “*whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith*” (Galatians 6:10). Paul also warns his readers that they should not “*grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption*” (4:30). This teaching resembles the words of Isaiah (“*But they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit; therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them*” – Isaiah 63:10); the ritual of sealing refers back to earlier baptismal references in Ephesians, including Paul’s teaching that “*in him you also, when you had heard to word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit*” (1:13). Believers who have been united in Christ and sealed in the Holy Spirit through baptism are to feel a particular concern for their behavior because it affects the holiness of the entire faith community.

Another effect of our incorporation into the Christian community is forgiveness, which serves as the final motivating clause of this section of the letter. Paul instructs his readers to “*put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander; together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another; as God in Christ has forgiven you*” (4:31-32). Christians are to avoid all the vices that have their origins in anger and the behavior it causes. Communal love and harmony are virtues that are the opposite of the divisions caused by anger:

- “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” – Colossians 3:12-13.

God’s forgiveness is the motive for Christian forgiveness, the forgiveness of which Jesus taught in the Lord’s Prayer that we are to pray that God will “*forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors*” (Matthew 6:14).

- “We ask in this prayer that our heavenly Father would not regard our sins nor deny these petitions on their account, for we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead we ask that God would give us all things by grace, for we sin daily and indeed deserve only punishment. So, on the other hand, we, too, truly want to forgive heartily and to do good gladly to those who sin against us.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

Our relationships with other members of the faith community are important aspects of the new way of life that is ours through our baptism into Christ. Believers must

constantly turn away from sinful behavior. When anger occurs, it must be put away and not harboured, for hanging onto anger and other resentments provides opportunities for the devil to divide the community. All Christians are called to strive toward the holiness and perfection that are given by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; *“our hearts are meant to be softened, overwhelmed by the kindness God has shown us, in a way that impacts all our relationships.”* (Peter S. Williamson).

The graciousness of God that we have experienced through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ serves as the motivation for Paul’s appeal to *“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.”* (5:1-2). While no human being can imitate God’s omnipotence or omniscience, we can imitate God’s forgiveness and generous love toward those who wrong us. We are called to “live in love” (literally “walk in love”) as Christ has loved us. Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross provides the pattern for how we are to offer ourselves to God, making our time, talents, and treasure available to God and others in self-giving love (*“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”* – Romans 12:1). We are to make our whole lives an act of worship, *“a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”* Those who imitate God as “beloved children” are called to “live in love” as Christ loved us.

- “By being transformed into his image, we are enabled to model our lives on his. Now at last deeds are performed and life is lived in single-minded discipleship in the image of Christ and his words find unquestioning obedience. We pay no attention to our own lives or the new image which we bear, for then we should at once have forfeited it, since it is only to serve as a mirror for the image of Christ on whom our gaze is fixed. The disciple looks solely at his Master. But when a man follows Jesus Christ and bears the image of the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord, when he has become the image of God, we may at last say that he has been called to be the ‘imitator of God.’ The follower of Jesus is the imitator of God. ‘Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children.’” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

For Christians who have been born anew to a living hope through our baptism into Christ Jesus, it may truly be said that imitation of God is the sincerest form of *discipleship*. When we endeavor to model our lives on the example of God’s love in Jesus Christ, when we decide to follow Jesus’ example of selfless giving and limitless love, when we place Christ first above all things and live according to his word, then we will live and walk in love and be living witnesses to the Gospel of

grace that is God's gift for all persons. May our lives be an imitation of God's love for all persons, so that through our witness others may come to know the love that is the blessing for all in Jesus Christ – the Lord of all.

Amen.