HERE AND THERE
Scripture: Psalm 130 and Ephesians 4:25-5:2

FOCUS: We are called to affirm our inherent goodness by living as imitators of God

We all came here this morning with some sort of hope or expectation, be it large or small. It could simply be the hope that I wouldn’t be too longwinded. Perhaps you came because you have had a bad week and need to be encouraged. Maybe you came simply out of habit. It is Sunday after all and church is what you are supposed to do on Sunday, right? Not a bad habit to develop I would say, but what else can I say, I am the preacher. Or maybe you came because you are struggling to feel a connection with God and are hoping God will speak to you today. You might have come looking forward to being with a group of folks who share your values and who encourage you. Whatever the reason, you are here, and I am glad you are. Hopefully as you leave you will be glad as well. But glad for what reason?

How many of you remember the days when there were perfect attendance pins for Sunday School? I did a Google search and indeed you can still order them, those metal pins with clasps you can hang small banners on. The deal is each year you have perfect attendance you get a new banner and the one who has the longest trail of banners on the pin is the winner, has the most perfect attendance, is the most faithful. Attendance is important. When we joined the United Methodist Church we promised to uphold it with our presence, among other things. We made a commitment.

Other organizations also recognize the importance of attendance commitments. My Dad was a dedicated Kiwanian, and in Kiwanis, like in most civic clubs, there is an attendance requirement and recognition for perfect attendance. My dad took commitments seriously. When we would go on vacation for more than a few days Dad would search out the local Kiwanis meeting, which was not all that easy to do in those pre internet days, and would dutifully make a meeting each week. And if for some reason he couldn’t find one on a particular week he would go to two the next week to keep his record clear.

So why is attendance important? I must confess I have been to some mandatory meetings and conferences which caused me to ask just that question. Most of us have been to gatherings which offered little if any redeeming value. Yet don’t you know folks who prefer meeting to actually accomplishing anything. After all you are usually in rather comfortable chairs, and there is food and free pens and perhaps a koozy and you are away from your desk for a while. I think Paul was addressing a similar problem in the church there in Ephesus. They were pretty faithful to worship. They probably didn’t have perfect attendance pins of course, but they were quite proud of their faithfulness. We probably all know some of those folks, we might even be one of them. Faithful to every activity at church, diligent about never missing a Sunday or a Wednesday night and rather proud of it.

The issue Paul sought to address was not simply attendance, was not whether folks were in worship each week, though he certainly felt worship was important. In our study of the book of Acts we discovered that wherever Paul went on his missionary journeys, he was faithful to seek out the places of worship and to attend. So why is it that we are to gather here? What are we to gain from having been here? What do you expect from me? Oscar Wilde once said that about the worst advice you could offer anybody is, “Just be yourself.” While deep inside we really would rather like that kind of unlimited freedom, we certainly don’t want that to be the case for others. There need to be rules there needs to be accountability for all of our sakes.

I instruction and correction are important, we need to be brought back in line, right?.  That’s what preachers are supposed to be about, that is what you pay me to do, preaching is all about instruction and correction, right? After all, we are the ones who have all the answers and are expected to give them to you. We see all your faults and are commissioned to point them out. The modern vernacular use of the word “preach” reflects this perspective on my craft. If someone says, “Now, don’t preach at me,” you know what that person means. In common language preaching is about scolding, belittling, berating. That’s what people have come to expect of their preachers.

Will Willimon reports that in the first church he served out of seminary, after a few Sundays he asked for feedback on his preaching. He was surprised by the criticism he received. They said, “Well, you don’t step on our toes enough. You’re the preacher. You’re supposed to tell us where we’ve gone wrong and then tell us what we need to do to get right.” There are those, perhaps some of you, who think it is their duty to come to church for a weekly scolding: stop smoking, be faithful to your marriage vows, don’t cheat on your income tax, be kind to your children, don’t talk dirty, don’t get angry with one another, love everybody, volunteer to teach a Sunday school class, and of course remember your checkbook or money clip.

For those of us who dare stand in pulpits speaking under the authority of bishops who have laid hands on us and said, ***“Take authority to preach the Word of God and to administer the Holy Sacraments”*** it is a humbling and at times frightening responsibility. It is at times hard to discern what it means to faithfully exercise that authority.

There is a perception among some of my colleagues and many well-meaning parishioners that it is the job of we who speak on behalf of God to whip you folks into line, to deliver, in a different way each week, the same basic message, ***“You people are Christians and you ought to be acting like Christians. Is that too much to expect?”*** Sound logic, right? It is clearly a message we have all heard. It is a message I have delivered. The implication is simple. Folks need to try hard to act like Christians so that they can be good Christians. The problem is that, as reasonable as such logic may sound, it actually gets the whole thing backwards, places the horse before the cart, and that never turns out very well, horses are not very skilled at pushing things.

Actually such logic flies in the face of what Paul wants us to glean from today’s scripture, though at first glance it may not seem to be so. In this passage from the letter to the Ephesians, the writer does urge readers to do many good things and to change destructive behaviors. ***“Be angry, but do not sin. Don’t make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander.”*** I’m reminded of a song from my college years by the group with the great name Five Man Electrical Band. ***“Sign, sign, everywhere a sign blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind. Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?”***  Sounds like a lot of preaching. Sounds a lot like that scolding thing.

Do this. Don’t do that. Straighten up and fly right. Isn’t that what sermons, what church, is supposed to be about? Don’t do this if you want to be a good Christian. Do that so that you can be a good Christian? But as we look more closely we discover that Paul doesn’t tell these Ephesians to do all these good things in order to *be* Christians, but rather he tells them they ought to instinctively do all these things because they *are* Christians.

There’s a difference. Paul urges folks to do good things not to *become* Christian, but because they *are* Christian. He doesn’t say to them, ***“You pagans ought to do these things so that you can be good enough for God.”*** Paul says, ***“Do these good things because God has created you and you are good.”*** In Genesis we read that on the sixth day God created mankind. And then as that final day in the creation story comes to an end we read ***“God saw everything that he had made and indeed it was very good.”*** Not just good, very good.

 This text doesn’t say, “You ought to act like somebody.” It says, “You are somebody, so act like it!” You are a child of God. How many times in sermons have people been told that they or others are irresponsible, immature, and worthless? No wonder people act irresponsibly, immaturely, and worthlessly. If you hear it enough you come to believe it. Today’s text says it differently. It says: You people, all people, are somebody. You are the ones whom God has loved, the ones for whom Christ has died. You people are not hopeless, unloved, wayward nobodies; you are nothing less than royalty. Now, become who you are. The rest of this passage simply calls for us to be who we already are.

That is no easy task. It’s hard being a disciple, a Christian. It’s hard to do good things, to act well toward others, to live together in love in the church. But difficulty of the Christian life arises not because we’re nobodies trying to become somebodies. The difficulty arises from the fact that we are already members of a royal family, God’s own royal children, and we are trying to faithfully answer the call to imitate our Father, as all good children do.

That is the point of Paul’s rather outrageous challenge, found in today’s scripture, for us to be “imitators of God.” Is Paul crazy? Not only does he urge us to speak the truth, not sin through anger, give up stealing, let no evil talk come out of our mouths, and put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, and slander, but he tops it all off by urging us to imitate God! Is Paul crazy? It would be crazy, downright impossible, for us to try to imitate the love, the forgiveness, the grace of God in our little lives were it not that we happen to be, through grace, the loved, forgiven, children of God. That is who we already are, not who we seek to become. So, in a world of hate, we’re able to love because we have been loved. In a world of war, we’re able to be at peace because God has made peace with us. In a vindictive world we can forgive because we have been forgiven.

We all know that such a calling is not easy. No, living into such a calling is impossible on our own. We are still so very human, and we are still bound to be foolish, but we are also a part of that very good creation. We are very good creatures who are prone to wander. That is why we must constantly seek to center our lives not just while we are here on Sunday morning, but while we are out there all week long. Perfect attendance is worship is not nearly as important as is regular imitation of God out in the world. Centering is a term from the contemplative branch of our faith. It is simply an intentional, conscious, effort to place God and God’s will at the center of our lives.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, offers this prayer which he prayed daily as he awoke, ***“Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. All that I am and all that I possess you have given me. I surrender it all to you to be disposed of according to your will. Give me only Your love and Your grace;
with these I will be rich enough, and will desire nothing more.*** Make that a genuine prayer and you will be pretty well centered. That is not to say that you will never be uncertain, never confused. The words of Psalm 130 reminded us that sometimes we must wait. David wrote, ***“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.”***

I read words from a harried spiritual director this week which spoke volumes of this being centered thing. She wrote, ***“I was praying on the freeway, as I often do, driving to work. The trees lining the road held me like the walls of a church. I traveled up “the aisle,” remembering the day I met Jesus in Communion at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Why did this tree-lined freeway remind me of that unforgettable day? The cars processed up the lanes, bumper-to-bumper to our destinations where we would be perhaps blessed, broken, and shared.***

***I resisted the urge to put on the radio and dwelled instead on the first few words of the Our Father: hallowed be thy name. I spent several miles praising the one who made me. Hallowed be thy name. My mind then turned to questions I had for God: What am I supposed to be doing with my life? Where do you want me to be? Who do you want me to be? What activities should I pursue, and which should I let go?***

***I struggled with many thoughts, recalled broken relationships, and wondered if I had enough time to get to my 7 a.m. appointment. I was meeting a woman to discuss starting a new ministry at our parish. Should I instead be focusing on helping those on this earth who are most poor? I sought answers. And I only seemed to have ongoing questions. Before I knew it, I was at my off-ramp. How privileged am I to own this car and sip a hot cup of coffee, when half a world away a woman walks miles for water she needs to boil before she can even take a safe sip.***

***As I drove up the street, a muffler-shop marquee caught my eye. I read, “Stay Centered.” I breathed deeply and smiled, thinking what a great message to put on a sign in front of an auto repair shop. Who put it there and why? It seemed plausible that some prayerful business owner put that sign there to encourage passersby. It was the message that helped me breathe easier about all my questions. Stay centered.***

***As the light turned green and I drove closer, the words came into focus. They actually said, “Star Certified.” I laughed out loud, having seen what I needed to see, as if some movie special effects were playing tricks on me. And yet, I knew that was a divine invitation for me that day. When chaos seems to reign and confusion appears the only constant, I am invited to stay centered, remembering God is at the center of everything. Wisdom is found in that center.***

***Who says that God can’t find the most unexpected ways to reach us? Where have you been surprised by grace?***

As I thought about her experience I saw irony in what that sign said and what she needed to see. We live in a world where folks seem to be more interested in obtaining that which is star certified than in staying centered. But we were not born to be stars, we were born to be royalty, divine royalty, children of God. So here’s my challenge for you this morning, be yourself. That is, be the forgiven, loved, adopted, cherished, be the called people that you are. Or as Paul said it, “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.”  For your sake, for the sake of an often star struck world and for the sake of the kingdom of the creator of this very good world, let it be so. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.