

“Mimicking God”
 Ephesians 5:1,2
 June 24, 2001
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(READ 1 John 4:7-12,16,19)

Who do those who know you best say you are most like?

When they are thinking not of your appearance but of the way you act, who do they say you are most like?

Most of us probably, rather naturally, think of our parents or siblings, thinking those who know me best would say I am most like my mother, or my father, or my older brother.

I want you to see a rather striking statement in the book of Ephesians, chapter 5.

There, the Ephesian Christians AND WE are told,
 “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...”

We are called to “imitate” God.

We are called to “live a life of love”.

We are called to love as Christ loved us.

I think many of us respond to this as a very impractical and naïve command.

The very word “love” is so non-specific, so elusive, so freighted with sentimentality that it means everything and thus almost nothing.

Most of the time the command to love is not taken seriously as something we must actually do anything about.

We think of love as something that just happens.

You either feel it or you don't.

We feel love, we “fall in love”.

And therefore “living a life of love” seems ill-defined and probably just naïve sentimentality.

We can imagine living a life of integrity, wherein our thoughts, words and actions are consistent with each other.

We can imagine living a life of activity, wherein we are busy, engaged people.

But “living a life of love”? We can’t quite put any specificity to that!

We can imagine being known as an energetic person, and understanding what that might look like.

We can imagine being known as an engaging person and understanding what that might look like.

We can imagine being an intellectual person, an athletic person.

But we have a hard time imagining what it would look like to be a “loving” person.

In fact being a loving person sounds soft, even weak, certainly not the sum of what anyone would want to be.

He’s a “hard-charger”.

She’s brilliant.

He’s rugged.

He’s artistic.

She’s shrewd.

Now those are descriptions to which we can aspire.

But imagine being known primarily as a “loving” person and you have been consigned to a vague and unnecessary sentimentalism.

What’s more appealing to you –

to be known as like Mother Theresa or like Bill Gates?

What people do you wish to emulate?

Do you aspire to the fame of musicians or actors?

The business savvy of Alan Greenspan?

The physical ability of Tiger Woods or Shachille O’Neal?

Or do you aspire to be like God?

Now that’s not fair.

We are in church and we are all supposed to say that of course we would aspire to be like God.

But the truth is we don’t know what that would look like.

Paul said, “Be imitators of God...”

The word “imitate” is from the Greek word from which we also get our English word “mimic”.

We are to mimic God.

Is that possible?

I can't imitate his glory, his eternality, his power or wisdom.

What can I mimic?

We can mimic his moral character.

His holiness, his righteousness, his justice, his mercy, his love.

Here in our text (Ephesians 5:1-2) that is all summed up in the phrase, “live a life of love.”

Mimic God by living as he lives, “live a life of love”.

We are going to spend the next ten Sundays in our 70 day adventure called “Extreme Love – Loving as God Loves” looking at what that love is like.

Each week we will take a different dimension of that love, as defined in 1 Corinthians 13, and we will seek to understand and apply it.

But today I want to lay some groundwork for the series by looking carefully at what would possibly motivate us to “live a life of love” and ask “what does that fundamentally look like?”

I am about to take us into “territory” this morning with which I am not familiar enough but with which the Scripture is abundantly familiar.

It is said most succinctly by the Apostle John in 1 John 4:8: “God is love.”

I think I am only beginning to understand what that means for me and for us.

It seems easy to think of God as righteously indignant over sin – the frowning father.

Easy to think of him as passionlessly or stoically sovereign in his reign over all the earth – the remote monarch.

But to think of him as passionately, even giddily, in love with you and with me – that’s a stretch for many of us because we haven’t thought of God in that way.

I am not interested in pitting one attribute of God against another.

I am not suggesting that God is love and not therefore holy or just.

He is holy and just but we fail to know God if we fail to know him as love.

And we fail to know life, if we fail to know his love.

100 years ago a preacher gave “love” a definition that I like:

“Love is that insight and sympathy that craves to bless and delights to commune. It is that sense of need that can only be satisfied by giving. It is a quenchless desire for the well-being of the beloved.” (William Clow (in “Love’s Supreme Disclosure” (1908) in [Classic Sermons on the Love of God](#), 1998 p27

Love is a social passion.

Love can’t exist in a vacuum.

By its very definition, love needs more than one person.

“God is love.”

In this is inferential proof of the trinity.

Without more than one person there could be no love.

God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has always existed and always loved.

“Love is that insight and sympathy that craves to bless and delights to commune.”

God is relational and everything he does proceeds from his love – his desire to bless and commune.

Love must create, it cannot be inactive – it craves to bless.

God does not love the world because he created it; he created it because he is love.

He does not love us because he created us; he created us because he is love, he is relational, it is his nature – he would not be God if he did not love and did not create.

And love must care for what it creates – it craves to bless.

God has not turned his back on us but he tends and nourishes us.

Jesus said, (Matthew 6:25-26) "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life... Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they (are)?"

And love must commune, fellowship, relate to another in order to exist.

Like I said already, Love is a social passion.

Love can't exist in a vacuum.

We were created to be loved and to love.

This is probably the most fundamental thing I can say about you – **you were created to be loved and to love.**

You were not created primarily to work as if you were a cog in some cosmic machine.

You were not created primarily even to tell God how great he is, as if his ego needed massaging for eternity.

You were created to be loved and to love.

The Westminster Confession says it well in the opening statement:

"The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Please notice the "glorify" and "enjoy" – therein is relationship.

Pastor John Piper attempted to make this even clearer by changing the wording slightly – "The chief end of man is to glorify God BY enjoying him forever."

It is in relationship with God and each other that we achieve our primary purpose for existing.

We were created to love because God is love.

Love is part of what it means to be human, created in the image of God.

"In love the soul acts in accordance with its nature, because it is created to live in connection with other souls... The commandment to love is thus not a dogmatic invention, but a

direct expression of the character of the soul and the organism of family and people... He who keeps the law of love shows that his soul is sound.” Johannes Pederson Israel: It's Life and Culture 1954 p310

Now when you next set your goals for life or even for the week, factor that into the mix.

Better yet, make that the primary goal as God's word tells us. As the Apostle Paul said it, “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us...”

If I haven't been totally confusing in my comments thus far it is possible that you would summarize what I have said in this way:

God is love and we ought to mimic God by loving him and others.

If that is what I have conveyed to you then I have not begun to do justice to this text.

Yes, we ought to love God and others but, “ought” is not what this text is communicating.

Paul says, “Be imitators of God... **as dearly loved children...**”

Where does love start?

We don't initiate, we imitate.

1 John 4:10 This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us...”

God is the source of love.

Only when we experience love are we **able** to love.

God has not asked us to conjure something up, to manufacture a feeling, or to pretend.

He asks us to remember, to think, to realize, to embrace how loved we already are – “as dearly loved children, mimic God.”

Consider young children.

I am amazed at how they respond to love.

They do so unselfconsciously.

Like my son and my daughters before him, it was awesomely humbling but, knowing they were loved and loving in return, they had a great desire to be like me.

They liked to sit in my chair, walk in my shoes, wear my ties, and do whatever I was doing.

They loved to imitate me.

Why? Because they were my dearly loved children – it was as natural as life.

We imitate God because we are his dearly loved children.

We are not merely believers. We ARE believers but we are more than that.

We are not merely forgiven. We ARE forgiven but we are more than that.

We have been reborn, born into a new family, a son or daughter of God – his child.

Christianity is not a moral code imposed on us.

Christianity is a new relationship, being born into a new family with a new parent – we are children of God and thus we mimic him.

Belonging to him we are precious in his sight.

Parents know something of this.

You'd give your life for your child and not think twice about it.

You love them not because they are objectively lovable but because they are yours.

The tenderness you feel as you look at them sleeping in their beds, as they leave for the first day of kindergarten, or the first day of college, is the tenderness God feels for you.

Does God love you?

You say, "Sure, God loves everybody."

No, I am asking does God love you, you personally, the "you" that is uniquely you?

The "you" that is child of your parents, the "you" of your education, of your successes and failures, the slightly

overweight or underweight “you”, the “you” of your particular sins – that “you”.

Does God love you?

Many of us don't think so and least we don't think so in the way God actually loves us.

I am convinced many, maybe even most, of us misunderstand what love is.

Because we think of love as a reward rather than a gift, we misunderstand God's love and thus we are unable to mimic God's love.

With the time I have left I want to show you God's kind of love for you, you personally.

Here's the way Paul says it in our text: "...live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us..."

Over and over again in the scriptures when God wants to define his love for us he defines it by the cross:

1 John 3:16 "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."

1 John 4:9-11 "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Philippians 2:5,8

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...who humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross!

Romans 5:8 "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..."

Ephesians 5:2 “just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...”

How does this define love?

God’s love is not energy, a sentiment, a theory or a mood.

God’s love is a person and an event.

Love is not theory.

By way of illustration, suffering is not theoretical – it is an event and it calls for an event.

A New Yorker cartoon showed a little boy crying as he looked hopelessly at his ice cream cone lying splashed on the ground. An adult was bending down to him asking, “Do you want to talk about it?”

No, he doesn’t want to talk about it, he wants his ice cream cone.

He doesn’t want words, he wants action, he wants an event.

God’s love is not merely ideological or philosophical, it is event – Jesus came and died.

The English preacher of the 1800s, Charles Spurgeon retold the story of a man in India with a wife and four sons.

The family was starving to death and was offered food in exchange for one of the sons.

Who would they give up?

They couldn’t give up their firstborn. The second was the image of his father and the third of his mother. And the fourth was the baby.

As they considered each son, they realized they would rather die **together** than give up any one of them.

But God loves us so much that he did not spare his only son but permitted him to perish that we might

be saved. (Spurgeon in “Immeasurable Love” in Classic Sermons on the Love of God 1998 p41

God’s love is not sentimental – it is acted out in sacrifice.

God’s love is not only sacrificial, supremely manifested in the cross, but it also has another element that we usually forget.

God doesn't just love first, he loves us when we are not loveable and when we are deserving of his anger.

It was 1952, in a Marine bunker behind the enemy lines in North Korea.

Richard Manning and Ray Brennan were preparing to crawl forward preparing the way for the rest of their platoon.

Richard Manning describes what happens next, this way:

"We were passing a chocolate bar back and forth.

Ray took the last bite when a grenade lobbed by an undetected North Korean landed squarely in the center of the bunker.

Ray was the first to spot it.

Almost nonchalantly he flipped the candy wrapper aside and fell on the grenade.

It detonated instantly.

His stomach smothered the explosion.

I was completely unharmed, untouched.

He looked up at me, winked, and rolled over dead." (In Alan Wright Lover of My Soul 1998 p104)

Richard Manning is known to many of us as Brennan Manning, having taken as his own new first name the last name of his self-sacrificing friend, Ray Brennan.

Ray Brennan demonstrated sacrifice.

But imagine if Ray Brennan, who died, knew beforehand that Richard Manning detested him.

Would Ray still have rolled onto that grenade?

God did for you.

The miracle in the story of Hosea is not that he obeyed God and took a wife who was a prostitute **but that he loved her** and that his love was so strong that when she left him for other men, he sought her, and wooed her back.

The point is that God's love is not dependent on our worthiness.

In Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:3) God said, "I have loved you with an everlasting love..."

Despite all that they had done, God still loves his people and will love them forever...

Judah's conduct is indefensible.

But in the face of her sin God still loves Judah.

He does not simply tolerate his people – he loves them with all the fervor of his holy nature.

When everything else leads us to expect that God will abhor these sinful people, we find that instead he loves them, loves them with an everlasting love.

That brings me to the heart of our misconception of love.

We think love begins in the loved not the lover.

We act as if love is a response to someone else's loveliness or worth.

God does not love us because we are worthy; he loves us because **he is love.**

Love is the expression of **God's** nature not a response to our nature.

He loves us not for what **we** are but because of what **he** is.

Frankly, we rebel against that.

We want to be loved for who we are.

We think that a love not based on appreciation for who we are is unreal.

We want to find in ourselves the reason for our being loved.

But God first loved us not for what he saw in us but for what was in him.

“This is love not that we loved God but that he loved us and gave his life a ransom...”

And we like to love others in that way – when they deserve it.

We tend to love with a banker's mentality – you'll get as much out of this relationship as you put in, maybe I'll lend you some “love” but I need to see that you will pay it back.

I want you to hear two parables that compare how we define love and how God defines it:

There is a rabbinical parable from the Talmud that is similar to our definition of love:

“...a king...had hired many laborers, one of whom so distinguished himself by industry and skill that the king took him by the hand and walked up and down with him. In the evening the laborers came and the skilful one among them, to receive their pay. The king gave them all the same pay. Wherefore those who had worked the whole day murmured and spake: We have worked the whole day, and this man only two hours, and yet he also has received his whole pay. The king replied, This man has worked more in two hours than you in the whole day.”

(In Morris Testaments of Love p155)

Notice please the basis of pay – The worker earned it by working harder.

Now compare that with Jesus’ parable of the laborers in the vineyard. It will sound similar in many respects but the bottom line is so different:

Men were hired to work. Some were hired early in the morning, others at 9 still others at noon and some late in the afternoon and yet all were promised and paid the same pay. Those who worked all day complained but the master said those who had worked all day had been treated fairly and he had the right to do what he wants with what belonged to him.

Jesus makes the point that God does not deal with us on the basis of fairness or justice but on the basis of grace.

His treatment of us is not based on what we have done but on what **he** decides to do in love.

The love we are to have for others is the kind of love God has for us. It is a love for the unworthy, a love for the unlovely, a love not based on the person’s worth or worthiness but based solely in our desire and commitment to love.

It is unmotivated by the person loved.

It is a desire and commitment that mimics God’s love for us.

Thus how the other person acts will have no bearing on our love.
Their goodness will elicit no more love from us and their sin will elicit no less love from us.

That's the starting place of mimicking God's love – living a life of love.

We have always assumed that we must be loveable for God to love us.

And we have always assumed that we will likewise love those who are loveable, deserving, those who ask for love and respond to it.

But God loves us sacrificially and unconditionally because his love starts with him, not with us.

When we realize how loved we are, we can begin to mimic God.

During these next 70 days, don't turn love into raw duty – preachers and people alike – don't turn love merely into commands to be obeyed.

Instead, reflect on how God loves you and mimic that love.

PRAYER

Seminar this afternoon!
3:00 register at the door.