

Ephesians 4: 25 – 5: 2 “Imitators of God” Rev. Janet Chapman 8/12/18

Our text comes from the 3 year cycle called the Lectionary which has been in existence for decades and provides a resource for congregations to hear from one of the majority of biblical texts within a 12 year span of time. Three years ago, I chose John’s passage where Jesus calls himself “the bread of life,” and discovered how many folks are truly troubled with that somewhat cannibalistic symbolism. The Hebrew text for today is from 2 Samuel regarding the death of King David’s son, Absalom, a rather depressing but significant story. The 3rd text, Psalm 130, reflects the agony and suffering which was so apparent 2 weeks ago as the psalmist proclaims, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!...” When the fire broke out and an “F3” tornado ripped into Redding, (and there are some words this Kansas girl never thought she would say in these parts), the words of the Psalmist were all too familiar: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord...hear my voice!” It was an example of how scripture continues to speak to our hearts several thousand years after it has been recorded. But the epistle, the letters of the New Testament text, held my attention this week as it played out more than ever before that I can remember. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children and live in love...”

The entire passage lists the virtues and duties that mark the transformed and transforming community and help to define the Christian life. They are attributes we experienced more than a few times these past few weeks. I attended the Community Information meeting Monday after the fire broke out as first responders got up one by one and explained to us what was happening and why. The tension and concern in the room was palpable, but it was evident how deeply these representatives cared – they seemed to get that

we weren't some number in a file but real people with livelihoods and memories and families at stake. Every effort was made to "speak truth" as Paul says, "to our neighbors, for we are members of one another." As if the apostle were sitting in our midst taking notes, there was talk of the need for the thieves to give up their stealing, for folks to direct their anger not at each other but at the reality of the fire, to put away malice and speak only of what is "useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear." I loved hearing how much the first responders enjoyed reading the relatively few posted signs of encouragement around town. And with that, the effort blossomed. Now you can hardly go down a road without seeing positive and uplifting words boldly proclaimed on posters. We saw some of this after 9/11, but it was never so concentrated, possibly because we didn't live in downtown Manhattan. Just recently, one of the first responders said he'd never been in any community before that went to such measures of appreciation.

Back at the Civic Auditorium as the meeting was drawing to a close, one woman stood up who seemed oblivious to all that had been shared and demanded to know why she wasn't allowed to go home. There was no fire at her home, she had plenty of electricity, and with accusation and malice in her tone, she saw no reason she was being kept from her home. We all stared in amazement – she had taken a community wide disaster and made it all about her. I really wanted to give her a piece of my mind. Luckily, Marci and Kim were there and I decided against it. However, it didn't stop me from ranting and raving in the car, spouting off what I was really feeling. The anger got released and no one was hurt, except maybe my steering wheel. Then Paul's words came back to me, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

Paul takes his list of virtues and duties and summarizes them saying, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love...” It could be a mantra, a statement of purpose and direction for every person of faith. It most certainly is a description of Jesus’ life and teachings. If we are to take Jesus seriously, Marcus Borg writes, then we have to take Paul’s words to the Ephesians seriously. This means we train ourselves to be aware, keep our eyes, ears and hearts open to where God is being revealed; it means we train ourselves to be in tune with the vivid and frequent experiences of God in the everyday occurrences as well as in the crises. And when we say we believe that God is still at work, creating and transforming our world, the expectations for our lives become clear: Live a life of compassion and justice, the two central aspects of all of Jesus’ teachings. Every virtue, every duty laid out in living a Christian life is couched within a life of compassion and a passion for justice. We need both of these words, for compassion without justice easily gets individualized or becomes too sentimental, whereas justice without compassion easily becomes heartless politics. Compassion is the core value, the ethical paradigm of being faithful to God as we see it reflected in Jesus. Jesus himself sums up his theology and ethics in a very short saying in Luke 6:36 which says, “be compassionate as God is compassionate.” Paul carries it forward saying, “be imitators of God.” The word for “compassionate” in both Hebrew and Aramaic is related to the word for “womb.” Thus, to be compassionate is to be womblike, to be like a womb. God is womblike, Jesus says, therefore you be womblike. To speak of compassion as the core value of the Christian life may seem ho-hum to some of us. But contrast it for a moment with what many have said the Christian life is all about, that is, righteousness, you know, keeping your moral shirttails clean, avoiding being stained by the ashes of this world. In that sense, the

Christian life is profoundly different from compassion. In many ways, compassion is the opposite of righteousness when righteousness becomes self-oriented and judgmental. Jesus, as a person, was filled with compassion and he calls us to compassion.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, “Show me a hero, and I’ll write you a tragedy.” Who knows what tragedy he had in mind, but the premise resonates with me. This crisis has revealed compassionate individuals, people who have been willing to be stained by ash, be placed in the heat of danger, and worked tirelessly to ease the burdens of others. They are womblike imitators of God, living in love, by their small but significant contributions. You cannot help but notice the change in the grocery stores, the sidewalks and roadsides, the look in people’s eyes as you greet them. We have been transformed by this and one hopes that it is ultimately for good. Every one of you has heard amazing stories of womblike imitators, who humbly do not ask to be recognized but are only grateful to be a part of the process, God’s process of compassion and justice.

Our own Bonnie Sterling, one of the Search and Rescue folks, tells about the second day after the fire exploded in which she spent with 2 other Search and Rescue folks and a deputy checking the many burned out residences for any animals that may have survived. She said it was very surreal, more like walking through a graveyard of homes, with absolutely nothing alive. Security gates still beeping and trying to open or close, a water truck with its engine still running, everything smoldering. After dark, while still looking for a llama without success, something came up to the deputy and tugged at his pocket. It was a domesticated Canadian goose of the homeowner. It was more than ready to be picked up and rescued. Annie Coty, who sang for us a few weeks ago, used her best singing voice to calm several frightened

animals. Both her and Bonnie were called in to check on some chickens and indoor cats at a home on Lower Springs. When they arrived, they found nothing but smoldering rubble and many dead chickens. They never found any cats. However, they did find a live mother hen sitting on two eggs from her womb nestled under a burned-out trailer. Unable to catch her, they left water and feed in bowls. Once the evacuation lifted, Bonnie went back to check on the hen. Instead of finding her, she found the water bowl with a note inside which said. "We got the chicken! Thank you for all you've done! You made 2 girls very happy." Hearts decorated the note and it deeply touched Bonnie's spirit as this homeowner, having just seen her home, possessions and vehicles totally destroyed, took the time to thank them for saving the chicken. Vivid and frequent experiences of God are available to us all, whether in the handwritten note of a child or the heroic efforts of first responders. So Paul writes, "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love..."