

Belief
United Church of Broomfield
August 8, 2021

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 (The Amplified Bible)

²⁵ Therefore, rejecting all falsehood [whether lying, defrauding, telling half-truths, spreading rumors, any such as these], speak truth each one with his neighbor, for we are all parts of one another [and we are all parts of the body of Christ]. ²⁶ Be angry [at sin—at immorality, at injustice, at ungodly behavior], yet do not sin; do not let your anger [cause you shame, nor allow it to] last until the sun goes down.²⁷ And do not give the devil an opportunity [to lead you into sin by holding a grudge, or nurturing anger, or harboring resentment, or cultivating bitterness]. ²⁸ The thief [who has become a believer] must no longer steal, but instead he must work hard [making an honest living], producing that which is good with his own hands, so that he will have *something* to share with those in need. ²⁹ Do not let unwholesome [foul, profane, worthless, vulgar] words ever come out of your mouth, but only such *speech* as is good for building up others, according to the need *and* the occasion, so that it will be a blessing to those who hear [you speak]. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God [but seek to please Him], by whom you were sealed *and* marked [branded as God's own] for the day of redemption [the final deliverance from the consequences of sin]. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor [perpetual animosity, resentment, strife, fault-finding] and slander be put away from you, along with every kind of malice [all spitefulness, verbal abuse, malevolence]. ³² Be kind *and* helpful to one another, tender-hearted [compassionate, understanding], forgiving one another [readily and freely], just as God in Christ also forgave ^[a]you.

5 Therefore become imitators of God [copy Him and follow His example], as well-beloved children [imitate their father]; ² and walk *continually* in love [that is, value one another—practice empathy and compassion, unselfishly seeking the best for others], just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God [slain for you, so that it became] a sweet fragrance.

What does it mean to “believe in Jesus”?

“Believing in Jesus” entails more than simply having opinions about his divinity or his true nature or having answers — however carefully considered — to great theological questions. Believing in Jesus means more than reciting a passage in the presence of others. It means more than being able to quote and recite scripture. It means more than simple words...than *saying* anything. Believing in Jesus means taking his very life upon ourselves, rising out of our own little selves, and allowing his greater self to come alive within us. Believing in Jesus entails becoming a *church*; in other words, one body, with a common goal and a common vision, comprised nonetheless of unique individuals, each with a unique gift and contribution to make.

What we are receiving in today's scripture, is a glimpse of what this kind of “believing in Jesus” looks like. Calls to this kind of fleshed-out *belief* — in God, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit — are scattered throughout the scriptures.

“What does the Lord require of us?” The prophet Micah asks this question and answers, that the Lord says that we “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.”¹

What does the Lord require of us? *Jesus'* answer to that question is that we “believe in the one whom God has sent.”²

What does the Lord require of us?

What is true discipleship?

What does it mean to “believe in Jesus”?

In today’s reading, the apostle Paul gives one congregation of the early church *his* answer to these very questions and the answer is jarring. He tells us that we are to be nothing less than *imitators of God!*

Be imitators of God! These are our marching orders as a church, as a body of individuals who call ourselves after the name of Jesus.

Be imitators of God! The life of faith is not about putting God or Jesus on a pedestal and stopping there, keeping them safely at a distance as unapproachable objects of reverence that really make no demands on us. We are called to be *imitators* of God, *imitators* of Jesus. We are called to do nothing less than to bring God down to our level — or rather, to understand and to affirm that God, in Jesus Christ, has come down to *our* level to show us how to live our human lives.

Be imitators of God! Now how do we go about doing that? How in the world can we, mere mortals, be imitators of *God* — the Creator and Ruler of the universe? Paul is telling that little church at Ephesus — and *us* — that imitating God is not some unapproachable, mystical fantasy. Paul is showing us that being imitators of God consists of nothing more than an act of will, or rather several acts of will. If “Step One” is to believe in the one whom God has sent, then “Step Two” is ... *to be imitators of God!*

How? How can we be “imitators of God”? By choosing to do certain things, choosing to live in a certain way, choosing to conduct ourselves according to certain concrete, discernable measures.

“Put away all falsehood,”

“Speak the truth to our neighbors.”

These are acts of will; these are behaviors we can choose to act out and to live out.

Put away falsehood and speak the *truth* to one another. No more white-lies; no more denying science and resisting facts, no more saying things we don’t really believe just to make our neighbors feel good, — these neighbors we must live with day by day, and who might get honest with us if we start being honest with *them*. Speak truth, Paul says. The *truth*. Not just whatever we happen to be thinking or feeling at the time, but the truth — and *only* truth that is useful for building up; we are not being called here simply to unload on one another whenever we feel like it.

What would our life as a church be like if we all decided resolutely to speak the truth to one another? That would mean *all* of us, speaking the truth as we saw it, no matter how high or how low on the totem pole we might be. Each and every one of us, speaking what’s on our heart, being completely honest with one another about what we see as good and useful for the building up of the church; of each one of us as *the church*.

Be imitators of God, Paul says. And imitating God begins with truth-telling. And it goes on from there. “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander” What would our lives look

like, what would our *church* look like, if we followed these instructions to the letter? What would our lives be like if we resolutely committed ourselves to tell the truth to one another? And no *bitterness*, no *wrath*, no *anger*, no *wrangling*....

No *wrangling*?? Can you imagine a church without *wrangling*? Can you imagine a church in which people resolutely put aside wrangling over this issue or that issue? Is such harmony possible, even for a church? It's not like we are a fighting congregation, but depending upon issues and circumstances, we do wrangle...we do get angry, right? What would our life as a church be like, what would our life as a people be like, if we declared, from this moment forward, a permanent moratorium on wrangling? On Anger? What would our lives be like if we forgave as Christ forgives?

Part and parcel of truth-telling is our handling of anger. BE ANGRY, be righteously angry. Paul says; "do not let the sun go down on your anger," he says in an earlier verse. This is deceptively difficult for many of us who are conditioned always and everywhere to be "nice." We're not taught how to be righteously angry and to balance our anger and understand its usefulness. If you are angry, Paul is saying, don't just blow up in somebody's face. But neither are we to bottle our anger up, keep it to ourselves, nurse it so that our "anger" becomes a perversely prized little possession that we carry around with us and take out when we think no one is looking. "Do not let the sun go down on your anger," Paul says. In other words, if you are angry with someone, go to that person before the sun goes down and have it out with them. Don't fight – communicate, dialogue. If you are angry, don't nurse it; deal with it before the day ends. Work toward resolution. And when you go to your brother or sister with your anger, don't be surprised if they come back with a little anger of their own.

What we begin to see from all this is that the life of faith, the life of *belief* in Jesus, is not simply a matter of holding to theological opinions — dare I say *wrangling over theological beliefs*? Nor does belief in Jesus consist of putting Jesus and God up on a pedestal and "worshiping" them as unapproachable objects of reverence and awe. Belief in Jesus consists of work. *Hard* work done by and among less-than-perfect people. The church at Ephesus, I'm sure, was not a perfect and pretty little community of pleasant people making nice with each other (like us?). It was a community composed of some reformed and not-yet reformed thieves. It was a community of people given, sometimes, to wrath, to anger, to bitterness and to wrangling. Paul would not have been writing about these things had there not been anything to write about.

Do we have any such people among us now? Do any among us harbor some anger, some bitterness, some wrath — maybe even, if we're honest, a little *malice*? If so ... we're normal. Are we bitter, some of us? Are we angry? Are we nursing some grudges, against society, against our families, maybe even against the church? Maybe even against *God*? If this is the case, if there are among us some who are angry, bitter, even malicious, we are normal. We are in the right place. The church was made for such as us. This is what church is! Christ died for people like us. Jesus sacrificed a life he could have lived any way he wanted to live it for *us*, so that we could see that there is truly a way out, a way through, a way past pettiness, bitterness, maliciousness — a way past death itself.

So, what must we do to perform the works of God?

Believe. Believe in the one whom God has sent. Believe in Jesus. Believe in the way – the way that Jesus taught. Don't wrangle over opinions *about* him; *believe* in him. In love, in compassion, in kindness and sacrifice

for creation. Don't put him up on a pedestal and "worship" him in a way that keeps him at arm's length. Don't claim for him a "reverence" and "awe" that really makes no demands whatsoever. Believe in him. Follow him.

Let us, from this day forward, be nothing less than *imitators of God*, kindhearted truth-tellers, devoted solely and absolutely and *only* to what is useful for building up.

AMEN