



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 August 11, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: “The Rage Machine”

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 (NRSV)

So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another.

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Those who steal must give up stealing; rather, let them labor, doing good work with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

“The Rage Machine”

Well, Westminster, it has been a year.

– a year since I first stood in the pulpit on Rally Day of 2023,
 as your new pastor.

I was so innocent back then. So fresh and idealistic.

So young, in fact, that only about a month into my pastorate here, the Rev. Angie Wuysang, a Presbyterian Peacemaker from Indonesia, made a point of saying, as she was leading our worship service as a guest preacher, that she thought I looked like a young Tom Cruise.

Do you all remember that? I do. I do.

Now, anyone who's ever heard me preach, knows I hold a healthy dose of self-esteem. But I also own a mirror, and I know, I'm no Tom Cruise.

Which leads me to believe 1 of 2 things was going on:

- Either that was her polite way of saying all white guys of a certain age look exactly the same to her. OR
- She looked out at the congregation, guessed that 1990s Tom Cruise would be culturally relevant to many of you 30 years later, and used it as a funny way to flatter the pastor.
 - By the way, it worked.

Rev. Wuysang actually sent me a Christmas card two months after her visit to Westminster. I swear, I'm not making this up. It read:

“Dear Rev. Tom Cruise, I wish you and your church family the very best in this Christmas season.”

Who do you think you resemble? Who do I resemble?

According to the book of Ephesians, as a community and as individual Christians, we are to resemble God: *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.*

But what does that mean?

How could human beings ever resemble God: creator, redeemer, sustainer? It seems a tall order. An impossible order. Forget having a perfect jaw line like Tom Cruise. How are human beings supposed to resemble the one in which we live, and move, and have our being? It seems Ephesians is setting us up to fail.

But reading the book as a whole, you see Ephesians means something very specific when it tells us to imitate God:

As Barbara mentioned last week, according to the book of Ephesians, God is that Spirit who brings people together, a Spirit of unity and union. Specifically, as Ephesians sees it, there was once a divided people:

- Jews, the children of the promise.
- And Gentiles, those, who, according to the author, were once “alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance of their hearts” (4:18).

And yet we are all now one by the work of God in Jesus Christ:

- *For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall.* Ephesians, ch. 2
- *It has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise.* Ephesians, ch 3
- *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.* Ephesians, ch 4.

To a Jewish writer, like the author of Ephesians, who grew up his whole life long thinking God had chosen one people and not the other, who thought that one group was wholly right in its understanding of God and the other wholly wrong, this message of unity between Jew and Gentile was earth-shattering, paradigm shifting. God is not a God of division but of union.

So, *imitate that*, he said. Bring people together, *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.*

That is what it means to be imitators of God.

Which, at least, to me comes as a relief.

Because sometimes, when we read verses like that, saying we are to “be imitators of God,” we go much more to division rather than unity; the idea that God chooses some, and not others – and to imitate God, we really have to work to make sure we’re on the right side.

You hear “be imitators of God,” and you think that means you have to be pure, and sinless, and holy.

You hear “be imitators of God,” and you think that means that you have to have the right interpretation when it comes to what the church, and the creeds, and the Bible says, that you have to always be right, and even more, that you can’t ever be wrong. After all, how could an imitator of God ever be wrong?

And if imitating God means you’re always right, that means, if someone disagrees, then they’ve got to be wrong. And you better tell them that they’re wrong.

Because in a world where people are either right or wrong, holy or impure, where some are closer to God and others are farther from God, then a conversation isn't a conversation, it's an argument.

I have my side, and you have your side. And since my side is right (because I'm an imitator of God, after all), our argument isn't about gaining understanding, it's about winning. I need to win that argument.

“Be imitators of God,” says the book of Ephesians. And for so many Christians, that means putting back up that dividing wall. It doesn't mean unity, it means division - an us and a them. It puts us into a confrontational stance.

Do you ever find yourself trying to imitate God in a confrontational stance?

About 7 years ago, I drastically cut down my social media usage, because I found I was getting into arguments all the time. For example, I got into it with a woman who twenty-five years ago was a teenage girl who sat behind me in homeroom. I hadn't spoken to her in decades, but were friends on Facebook, and one day she posted Deut. 22:5 onto her account, “A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment.” At the time, she was posting that verse to support anti-trans legislation that was then going through the North Carolina state Senate, that sought to force transgender individuals to use the bathroom of the sex they were assigned at birth.

In response, I asked if she had read Duet. 22:11, which comes just 6 verses later, where the Lord commands, “You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together,” and I asked if she had checked all the labels in her closet. Now granted, I still think that's a pretty good comeback. And I still think that I was right.

But, let's face it, I didn't win any hearts and minds that day. She probably just left that conversation remembering why she didn't like talking to me in homeroom in the first place.

There's something broken in that way of talking to each other – or better yet, that way of talking past each other. Social media thrives on outrage. And it's not just social media, it's all media. Outrage keeps you glued to the screen.

It's even our political system itself, which more and more, is built, not so much on a common vision or unity, anymore. It's built on anger and fear. One side is completely right. One side is completely wrong.

We talk past each other. We are taught to fear each other.

I'll give another example:

If you live in Tennessee and you watched the Olympics, you could not help but see a political ad by one of our Senators that called a trans-athlete dangerous and degrading.

Over and over, I saw that ad last week:

“dangerous and degrading; dangerous and degrading.”

You saw the athlete's face but never heard her name. You never learned her story. She wasn't treated as an individual; she wasn't treated as a person.

Just 'dangerous and degrading.'

That ad came up as a topic of discussion, in this church, when we held a safe-zone training series where members of Appalachian Outreach spoke about the impact of this type of language on members of LGBT communities. In the second week of the class, a trans-man named Gibron came to speak. He started simply by introducing himself and telling his history:

He said he was a veteran and a retired police officer. He talked about his kids and grand-kids. He said that he hadn't transitioned until much later in life and spoke openly about the impact it had on his family.

The week after Gibron spoke, there was a more informal question and answer period in the class. And the question of trans-athletes came up. And as you can expect, there was a wide range of opinions and beliefs about that. There were people who disagreed with each other. Of course, there were strong opinions in the room. - This is Westminster Presbyterian Church, we're talking about, after all.

But having been there, I can report back to you, even in disagreement, no one left angry. And even more importantly, no one left feeling ashamed. No one was called dangerous. No one said the reality of trans-athletes was degrading.

Because, even in that charged discussion, we weren't talking in the abstract. We weren't talking about 'the other.' We were talking about people, and not just Gibron, but about family members and friends of people in that room with us.

And in that moment, we were imitators of God, bound together by a Spirit that breaks down the dividing wall.

You see, we live in a world where that dividing wall still stands – where media and those in power thrive on our outrage – but that is not our calling as the church, where we *bear with one another in love*.

Does that mean we cannot disagree? Of course not!

Anyone who's ever been to a Session meeting knows that.

Does that mean that it's all kumbaya here, and we can never take a moral stance? *No*.

After all, *There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*. As a community gathered together in worship of this God, we risk hard discussions and take brave stances, because Christ calls us to follow him. So when it comes to issues of dehumanization; abuses of power; violence, war, and hate, the letter of Ephesians and the mission of the Church is quite clear. Just a few verses earlier, Ephesians tells us to “speak the truth in love.”

And at the same time:

- speaking the truth in love is not tribalism;
- it's not anger for the sake of anger;
- we are here to build community,

Because Christ has torn down the dividing wall. So, there is room for us to disagree on how best to follow Christ. If you have a different take from what you hear in a class or even from this pulpit, there is room for you here. For we are bound together by this common calling, this common Spirit, a Spirit that is big enough to hold us all, in unity and in difference.

The image on the front of your bulletin is a new logo for our church. It was commissioned by our Session and it is being used currently as we prepare to update our website in the coming months. Some of you may recognize, it is a replica of our stained glass in the sanctuary.

In fact, if you're wondering, it is modeled exactly off the window at the very back of the sanctuary to your left.

When I first saw it, I immediately said, yes. That is Westminster.

Notice, it is made of different shades of green. It instills a sense of unity and difference. Notice, it is made up of different branches, each at different places. But notice also, each of those branches, in their different places, they are all looking up. They are stretching together, growing together, aiming together – upwards, reaching upwards to God, to transcendence, reaching expectedly and faithfully, up to what is next.

When I saw it, I thought, that's Westminster.
Together in difference. Striving together, to be imitators of God.

Amen.