

Ephesians 4:35-5:2

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

⁵Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Prayer

“Live in Love”

August 12, 2012

Morningside Presbyterian

The Psalms are powerful pieces of poetry – hymns, prayers, and reflections that provide a glimpse into past understandings of God. These past understandings resonate for us today.

Psalm 8’s testament to God’s creative nature

Psalm 23’s assurance that the Lord is our shepherd no matter where we go

Psalm 100’s call to worship by making a joyful noise

Psalm 139’s reminder that we are fearfully and wonderfully made

Today's selected Psalm, 130, is a powerful piece of poetry because it lays bare the reality of sin and human imperfection, it reminds us of the nature of God as forgiving and loving, and it calls us to live in hope on that reminder. Still, Psalm 130 starts out with a cry from the depths – a place of chaos.

At times we all face the depths of chaos and uncertainty caused by sin. This imperfect reality is noted throughout scripture. Psalm 130 finds the poet crying out from the depths for redemption. What leaves you crying out from the depths of chaos and uncertainty?

The depths of an unresolved falling out with family
The depths of regret for commitments left unfulfilled to a spouse or child
The depths of unmanageable anger
The depths of denial over addiction
The depths of emptiness that cause us to bully a classmate or talk behind a co-worker's back

We all face depths in some form when we recognize and confront our iniquities – our sin. When we are in those depths hope may seem lost. Chaos seems to rule all that we can see and all that we can imagine.

And still the Psalmist recognizes a greater truth that rests on God's promises fulfilled in God's relational history with the Israelites. The Psalmist turns from dwelling in the anguish of wrongdoing to the reality that there is forgiveness with God. God brings redemption and steadfast love to those who cry out from the depths.

And yet there is another layer of transformation for the Psalmist and for the reader. Redemption is coming, but there may be a period soul-waiting must be

embraced, or at least tolerated, to see the fully revealed daylight of redemption in God.

Waiting is a virtue and a challenge for those with faith in God. Waiting isn't easy. It can cause anxiety. Waiting goes against the grain of our culture's insistence on instant gratification. Still, waiting in hope is a reality for those with faith in God.

Today I find myself in a place where some soul-waiting is required. Thankfully this waiting isn't due to the depths of sin. My place of waiting has been brought about by the end of a long commitment.

Last week I returned from two and a half weeks at Montreat Conference Center in western North Carolina. My time at Montreat was the culmination of two years of service as a Youth Conference Co-Director.

Prior to arriving at Columbia Seminary and Morningside Presbyterian, I accepted a call to serve as Outie Co-Director for weeks 5 and 6 of the youth conferences at Montreat. My role as Outie Co-Director meant that I would oversee conference events held outside the main Auditorium – specifically recreation events and small groups.

During two and a half years of planning my tasks varied,

- Co-recruiting planning and leadership teams *and* co-leading team and leadership meetings,
- Finalizing plans and diagrams for recreation events
- And discussing a long list of details over conference calls

It was quite the process.

On-site I found the days to be exciting and exhausting.

- I spent time working with recreation leadership to oversee plans and supplies for events involving 1,500 youth and their leaders.
- I made vital, life-giving birthday cake ice cream runs to the Huckleberry for occupied staff members.
- I helped coordinate a live Minute-to-Win-It show both weeks.
- I ran traffic control for small group leader responses to tragedies in church groups.

Co-Directing was one of the more challenging and more rewarding experiences of my vocational life.

I'm still processing the end of that commitment and discerning what I've learned and how I've grown. The end of such a process has caused some anxiety, but ultimately it is leading me on a path of reflection and growth. It is leading me to be more comfortable with waiting for God to reveal what is next.

My co-directing experience itself helped me to reflect and grow. Thankfully I was able to grow in my own spiritual development. This came from devotional time with our team, from conversations with mentors, and from encountering our theme through keynote and worship.

The theme for this past summer's Montreat Youth Conferences was Perfectly Imperfect. This theme focused on elements of the Christian journey and honestly dealt with the reality that we are not perfect individuals. We are not perfect individuals yet we are loved and welcomed by God.

By extension, the theme of Perfectly Imperfect honestly dealt with the reality that the church is not perfect, precisely *because* God calls imperfect people into new life. And with that new life comes the invitation to be in community with other believers.

As my two-year commitment to Montreat has come to an end, I wait in hope and I give thanks for the reality of the perfectly imperfect Christian community.

The powerful reality is that God's steadfast love and power to redeem call all into new life. The reality is that the church is a gathering place for imperfect people made new in Christ. As a part of that new-ness the old is put away, not just for self-preserving reasons but also for the sake of the community of the church and for the sake of the world that we live in.

God calls the thief to a new life where there is no room for stealing but for effort that leads to charity and love.

God calls the liar to a new life where there is no room for lying, but instead the value to honesty.

God calls the imperfect. And when the imperfect come together they, we, are called to live in love. There is no room for bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, or malice. These attributes are part of our imperfect reality but they are to be put away. In their place we are called to be not only kind, not only honest, not only forgiven. We are called to be imitators of God.

UCC preacher and professor Richard F. Ward writes, "Imitating God means putting our focus on the actions that flow from God's character."

When we put away actions that reflect our imperfection and brokenness, we make room for actions that reflect God's steadfast love, forgiveness, and redemptive grace.

When we put away imperfect and broken actions, we are called to enter into community with others who have been called by God. This community is the

community of believers who are perfectly imperfect. It is the community of believers who are called by God despite our imperfections.

You are in this community because God loves you and has called you into community. No church is perfect. There will be moments of disagreement. There will be times when one person's views on the focus of a committee or the protocols of worship may clash. Even though the church isn't perfect, God intends for those in community to live in love.

For the author of Ephesians, a life lived in love is a reflection of a life that imitates God. What does it look like to imitate God? The concept of imitating God seems audacious. However, if we return to Psalm 130 we find characteristics that may guide us to faithfully strive to reflect God's light.

Psalm 130 tells us that God is forgiving, has the power to redeem, and responds with steadfast love. If we are to imitate God these are three attributes to which we should aspire – forgiveness, the power to redeem, and steadfast love. But what does that look like today, you might ask?

We are not God, but as we aspire to imitate God as beloved children, we are called to forgive others in our community. Who do you need to forgive?

We are not God, but as we aspire to imitate God as beloved children, we are called to work for reconciliation – a mark of redemption. Where do you see a need for reconciliation?

We are not God, but as we aspire to imitate God as beloved children, we are called to live in love. Steadfast love is impossible for us, but living in love is an ideal to which we must aspire. This love, if in the model of Christ, is one that is sacrificial. It may not mean giving up one's life but it does mean sacrificing those things that separate us from right relationship with God and others in the community of faith.

It may mean sacrificing our assumptions about others. It may mean including and welcoming all whom God calls at the table – theif, liar – the imperfect.

Morningside is a place of inclusion – a place that intentionally and naturally seeks to build up. I've seen that in my time as Youth Director and as Intern. This summer I've been blessed to encounter the welcoming spirit of this community – in new friendships and, as always, in great food.

Morningside is a community with open arms. Bring your questions, bring your frustrations with the church as an institution, bring your hurts. But don't forget to bring your hopes, your joys, and your experiences. God intends for Christian community to be based on the ideal of living in love.

Striving to live in love does not mean that we'll agree or never be angry at each other. Striving to live in love should mean that we move beyond reactive tendencies toward practices that embrace and encourage all who gather to worship God.

Living in love as the body of Christ means that we laugh together, grieve together, worship together, break bread together, hope together, serve together, and love God and our neighbors in this world together.

The call to live in love has resonated for Christians throughout the ages. Today's hymn following the sermon is a paraphrase of the prayer of St Francis. St Francis was born into wealth and served in a local militia. He was captured and imprisoned.

These and other trials brought forth a significant shift in his life. St Francis soon exhibited a new way of life – a way of life that led to giving away family money to the poor, serving in mission in hostile lands, and preaching a message of earth care centuries before its time.

St Francis's new way of life was much different than his roots. It was rooted in a situational understanding of what it meant to live in love – to give and to give up.

For St. Francis new life meant putting away many physical comforts and pursuing a repentant life focused on living in love. The prayer of St. Francis, is a reminder of the contrasts that we face in life – the imperfections of human life contrasted with the perfect ideals of a life lived in love. The words of St. Francis...

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

(7sec Pause)

The words of St Francis resonate for me, much like the words from Ephesians and Psalm 130. I hope they resonate for you.

Imperfection is part of the reality of our world and our daily life – hatred, injury, doubt, despair, darkness, sadness.

Yet, the good news is this – the qualities of God’s perfect love are real and have been revealed to us in Christ. The qualities of God’s perfect love are exactly what we – you and I – are called to faithfully imitate... Joy, Light, Hope, Faith, Pardon, and Love.

Love is our example and love is our calling. Despite the depths of sin, God redeems us and despite our imperfections God calls us to live in love.

To God be the glory. Amen.