

IMITATORS OF GOD?

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Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Therefore be imitators of God. Excuse me, St. Paul, what did you just ask us to do? I have enough problems with the WWJD bracelets. I am not Jesus and I cannot do what he did and now I'm supposed to imitate God? That seems to be a pretty tall order.

As we say in Godly Play, I wonder. I wonder how we might go about imitating God? This question leads to an even more important question. If we are to imitate God then we need some sort of image of God that we can imitate. Images of God are a particularly fascinating area to ponder. If you go to a spiritual director within a short period of time they are almost guaranteed to ask you what your image of God is. In working with people in my office in times of stress, I often find it helpful to ask them to describe who and what God is to them. When a person's image of God is examined, their relationship with God and view of how God works becomes clearer.

Your image of God effects your relationship with God and your worldview. As I pondered this I began to reflect on how our images of God color our theology. It also strikes me that much of the stress and disagreement in Christianity today may have at its roots very divergent views of who God is and how God works in the world. If you think that God sends hurricanes to punish sinful cities and that prayer can convince to God to spare God fearing cities, this says something about who God is for you. Sometimes a destructive image of God inspires destructive behavior as we see in religious strife around the globe.

This line of thinking and wondering led me back to two books one by Marcus Borg and the other by Fr. Paul Coutinho. In *The God We Never Knew*, Marcus Borg looks at the various images of God in scripture and how they effect our religious experience. Fr. Coutinho's book, *How Big Is Your God* looks at how some of our images of God restrict our ability to comprehend the incredible power of God's love. The problem comes when our image of God restricts, limits or interferes with our ability to enjoy the freedom to experience the Divine. This happens when we give human attributes to God. This is exactly what Paul is writing about to the people in Ephesus.

Part of the challenge is that we do not have just one image of God in the Bible. Marcus Borg breaks the images into two types, transcendent and imminent. Transcendent images are of God out there. Imminent images are of God down here.

The transcendent images of God like King or ruler lead to an image of God that can be describe by words like: Grandeur, majesty, glory, power and authority, lawgiver and judge, source of justice and protection. Since kings throughout most of time were male, this also tends to feed into a male dominated image of God. This monarchical view can also make God seem distant and unapproachable, but also very powerful.

Some people in fact many people find that image immensely comforting in times as troubled as these. That may be why this is such an enduring and powerful image through the ages. This is certainly an image that runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the history of Europe. For with the power comes the promise of protection and just listen in the prayers of the people how many requests for protection are made.

Borg then turns to a discussion of the images of the imminent God. The images of the God down here with us are ones of God as spirit that stress relationship, intimacy and belonging. These are images of God as the ruach, the breath sweeping across the earth and creating the world. God is in the rocks and the hills, the places where the veil is thin as some writers would say.

God is father, but a different type of father, a very intimate father. John's gospel, which we will be reading for the next several weeks, has Jesus refer to God as ABBA. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was speaking at VTS for a graduation service in 2003. I remember his leaning over the podium just like this and saying. The relationship of God and Jesus is the relationship described by the word Abba. Abba, father, daddy, Pops! According to Desmond Tutu, this is the relationship God wants with all of us. Now look how different Desmond Tutu's image of God is. Not someone somewhere out there, but down here wrapping us in loving arms, covering us with wings like a mother bird. There is a powerful image, of the caring mother figure that appears in both testaments as a legitimate image of God.

God as companion is found also in both scriptures. God as the pillar of fire leading the people across the desert is one example. Jesus walking across the water and calming the seas is another. Jesus returns in John after the resurrection and is known when he breaks bread with them, feeding them again with the images of bread and fish. He walks with the two on the road to Emmaus and provides breakfast on the beach. The good shepherd images again carry the image of loving care.

Of course this image is not without its challenges. For a person who wants assurance of protection these images of God as the one down in the pit with us may not be helpful. If you are so powerful get me out of here, they might cry. Yet this image of God is one that comforts us in our distress, but in a different way.

This image also carries its implications for sin. Sin in this image of God is violation not of law, but of relationship. This is Jesus answering the Pharisee with the great commandment. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind and the second is like unto it. Love your neighbor as yourself. On this hangs all the law and the prophets. Jesus commands us to love one another as he loves us. Sin is not breaking the law, but breaking the relationship with God. This is directly stated in our Catechism in the definition of sin.

In today's readings we see God portrayed as lovingly giving us Jesus to be fed by his body and blood. There is no more intimate picture of a relationship with God that I can think of. The imminent God is a lover.

So with all of that said, how do we approach the concept of being imitators of God. Again as often I turn to Peterson's Message translation of our passage. Listen to the last two verses:

Eph. 5:1 "Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. 2 Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that."

Listen to how that fits with our Gospel today. God's intimate giving of himself in Jesus as the bread of life, a gift given to feed and sustain us.

For the ancient world the concept of imitating is not to be like the person but to act in the way the person would. So Paul is challenging his people to act in ways that are consistent with God and in particular in the way we know God in the form of Jesus.

That is the key, to use Jesus as the model of how Paul wants us to view God. Jesus is the image of God that Paul wants us to use. This breaks with all the other images found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here Christ's instruction to love one another as he has loved us becomes the model. In this instruction the list of ways to behave listed earlier in the passage all begin to make sense.

Now this is still a challenge. Paul has some words about anger in his writing. We are going to get angry. In fact sometimes anger is a positive. Much change for good happens when people are angry about an injustice. A wise therapist once said, "Mark emotions are neither good nor bad, they just are. What makes the difference is what you do with them." Remember Jesus got frustrated and angry. He certainly wasn't smiling and happy when he turned over the tables in the temple, but this was anger at a wrong. So what we do with what we feel is to step back and think how would Christ handle this and then ask the really important question. What does Christ want me to do. This is different from the WWJD bracelet that I mentioned at the start, but asks us what Jesus would want us to do. I think this is a very important part of the incarnation of Jesus. To give us a human example to use to become imitators of God as Paul commands.

Ultimately responding in love is what Jesus did, time and time again. Responding in love is the message that I hear our Presiding Bishop preach time and time again. Responding in love is what we are called to do. That is how we become imitators of God.