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# “Accept All Imitations”

A SERMON on Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2 for the 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B  
*Preached 8 August 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister*  
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It’s fun to receive mail, isn’t it? Actual physical mail, delivered by the post office, that is. I mean, it’s not that I don’t appreciate hearing from any of you via email, but let’s be honest, email just isn’t the same as actual postal mail. And, of course, even more exciting is when the mail includes something other than a bill or an advertisement. You know, like an actual letter or card or postcard, sent to you by an actual person, not simply spit out by a computer as part of a mass mailing.

That’s why I’m happy to report that this summer I’ve had the privilege of receiving postcards from Lithuania, Prince Edward Island, Texas, Florida, France, Finland, Arizona, two from Russia, two from Germany, and three from Taiwan(!). Now, don’t be fooled: I don’t personally know people in all these locations. I definitely don’t know anyone in Finland or Taiwan. No, rather, these postcards have come by way of something called “Postcrossing,” which I decided to try my hand at back in February, shortly after I arrived here in Vancouver. With Postcrossing, how it works is that you sign up on their website, and you click the button to say that you want to send a postcard. You are given a random recipient to send a card to, and then once your recipient registers that they’ve received your card, your name goes into the pool to be assigned for someone else to send a postcard to you. And that’s really it... as the “about” page says on their website, “Why? Simply because ... there are lots of people who like to receive real mail. Receiving postcards from different places in the world (many of which you probably have never heard of!) can turn your mailbox into a box of surprises — and who wouldn’t like that?”<sup>1</sup>

One of the interesting challenges in doing Postcrossing is figuring out what sort of message to write. You’re not writing to someone you know, and there’s not an assigned question to answer or anything like that. You do get to see whatever biographical or self-interest information your recipient decided to share about themselves, but that’s about it. When the recipient registers your card when they receive it, they can type a short message back—but this is definitely *not* some sort of pen-pal relationship extending over time. It’s essentially one-way-only communication, a one-time “hello”.

Some of the letters that we find in the New Testament portion of our Christian Bible are a bit like that. Nearly 2,000 years ago, people certainly weren’t going to “reach out and touch someone” instantaneously with a phone call, a text message, or a tweet. Even with written letters: whatever you may feel about the reliability, speed, and cost of Canada Post, it’s still a whole lot better than what the earliest Christian leaders and churches had available. Simple letters could months to get between destinations. So like with my Postcrossing postcards, they wouldn’t have had a lot of opportunities for a lot of back-and-forth communication. Not only that, if someone

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.postcrossing.com/about>

wanted to write the same thing to a number of different recipients, they didn't make multiple copies of the letter and send each of them off in their own #10-business-size envelopes; no, one letter went out to the first place, and then after it had been read and dealt with there, it would be circulated onward to the next recipient, and so on. Sometimes the letters got circulated onward even if that wasn't explicitly requested. And so, a letter would have been crafted to speak an important message or address a critical need, often with an ear to what the message might have to say to others, beyond the original recipients.

Some of these letters that got circulated among the earliest Christian communities, they were found to be so valuable in what they said that Christians started gathering them up as witnesses to be heard right alongside the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament and the stories of Jesus. Somehow, through the power of the Holy Spirit at work within writer *and* reader, speaker *and* listener alike, something of the Word of God seemed to be speaking through all of it, a Word that we still listen for today, in our churches and in our lives.

We're going to listen in on a portion of the letter to the Ephesians over the next couple of weeks, trying to hear the Word that God might still be speaking to us through its witness. Even though the letters, or "epistles" as they're often called (just a fancy word for letter) make up 21 out of the New Testament's 27 books, I think it's fair to say that in traditions like ours here in The United Church and many of the other so-called "mainline" or "liberal" or "progressive" wings of Christianity today, we aren't as familiar with the Epistles, the New Testament letters, as we are with some of the other parts of the Bible. We know many stories from Jesus' life, as recorded in the four gospels. Some of us also are familiar with storylines from the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament—Noah and the ark, the Exodus, King David, the Israelites being taken off to exile in Babylon and the prophets who spoke the word of the Lord in the midst of it, Daniel in the lion's den and the three young men in the fiery furnace—even if we're not quite sure how they all fit together. But the New Testament letters just aren't very familiar to most of us anymore, even though through much of Christian history, they've been pretty central to figuring out some of our core faith claims, some of our core theology as Christians.

One of those big questions of faith and theology and just life-in-general that people sometimes wrestle with is why we do "good". Why do we do things that would be considered moral, ethical, virtuous, righteous... 'good'? Why *should* we do them? After all, does it really matter, in the end, what we do?

We hear this kind of wondering and questioning from the world around us, and probably from time-to-time from within ourselves. What does it matter what I do... After all, the other guy is going to get ahead anyway. On one side we hear the voice proclaiming that "the person with the most toys wins," while another reminds us that "you can't take it with you." Which one is right? Who gets to decide what is virtuous and righteous and good? And why should I care?

Perhaps the new Christians that made up the church community in and around Ephesus had pondered questions like these, too. Pastor, professor, and author Eugene Peterson points out that the past life of the Christians in the Ephesians community was formed in a very different

world than the typical Jewish culture that we associate with much of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> The Ephesians didn't have the 10 Commandments or any of the rest of the Hebrew moral code as a part of their background. Coming out of the world of Greek and Roman religion, their situation was not altogether different from so many in the world around us today, whose faith formation up to this point in life has centered on worshipping gods of fame and fortune, consumerism and competition—with maybe a little personal virtue from the self-help section of the bookstore thrown in for good measure.

And, quite frankly, some in our world today treat Christianity as if it were not much more than another selection on that bookshelf of personal virtue guides. Even among us here in the Church, there are people who seem to think that the point of Christian faith is to teach a few simple bits of morality. A so-called “good Christian” in this view is not too different from what any of us might think of as a “good citizen” or a “good neighbor”. To them, the important part of Christianity consists largely of the Ten Commandments and the so-called “Golden Rule.”

Maybe the instructions we've heard today from the letter to the Ephesians might seem along the same vein. If we hear these instructions as just being about ourselves as individuals, just one among many paths to personal virtue, just a way of making myself (yourself) better—basically, if we assume it's all about me and my holiness and righteousness and virtue—then perhaps that's right. And still unanswered is that age old question: why? Especially if you are someone who doubts or has trouble with the idea of some kind of eternal damnation and punishment in a next life—which I suspect is the case for many of us in this church—then why? Why does it matter if I'm good? You might say it's about being a better person, but what if *I* don't agree with *your* definition of what “better” is? Why should it matter if I do certain things, and don't do other things?

But here's the thing, my friends: It isn't about you. The Christian gospel is *not* about helping you become a more virtuous person. The Christian gospel is *not* about teaching you some morals, so that you can sleep easier at night trusting in your own goodness. Rather, the Christian gospel is about a gift.

The gift we have, the gift we have been given, is to be imitators of God. We have the power to be like God, to do what God would do, to love as God loves. The radical nature of the Christian faith, the scandal of the gospel, is not that we can be better *individuals*, but that together as a community we have been given the power and authority to imitate God's very self. *Not*, let me be clear, that we are supposed to usurp God's power and place in order to do what *we* want and claim it is of God... but rather that we have the gift of being like God ourselves.

Put away falsehood, the writer of Ephesians instructs, because God deals in truth. Live in love, because Christ loved us. Forgive one another, because God has forgiven you. We humans have a pretty bad history of attempting to *play* God, and truth be told, getting it very, very wrong. But the good news of the gospel is that, in Christ, we have a different kind of gift: the ability, not to put ourselves in God's place, but to bring God's own likeness into our place, to *be* as God *is*.

Forgive one another, because God forgives. Love one another, because God loves. Put

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<sup>2</sup> See Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

away bitterness and wrath and malice, because God has put these things away. I wonder, what would we in our world today would add to this list from Ephesians? What is God up to in the world that *we* have the power to do, too? Where do we see God at work in the world? And what power have we been given to be imitators of that work?

From time to time, you occasionally will hear someone say that the Bible is God's love letter to us. Now, don't get me wrong, I love the Bible and honour its place at the foundation of our Christian faith. But I have to confess that I think the Bible would make for a rather *strange* love letter. What if, instead, we were to recognize that the Bible is the testimony to how in Jesus Christ God has been and continues to be at work transforming *us*, God's people, shaping *us* into God's love letters to the world? Imagine that: you, me, us together—love letters from God to the world! I'm looking forward to discovering along with you the next recipients God is sending us to!

*Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto God, now and forever. Amen.*