

August 9, 2015
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Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Originals

In the Hyde Park, the neighborhood where my family and I used to live, there's a restaurant called *The Original Pancake House*. You know you have to pronounce it like that, because "*The*" is in italics. My husband Tim and I always laughed about that, sure that there are numerous other pancake houses with just the same name that make just the same claim. Recently, we saw that they had to relocate down the road in a different building. They still have the same sign and name: *The Original Pancake House*. It reminds me of a certain rock and roll band whose epic history is told in a documentary, a naughty but very funny movie, the title of which is also the name of their band: "Spinal Tap." But "Spinal Tap" wasn't their first band name. They first called themselves "The Originals." Then they found out there was another band of that name, so then they became "The *New* Originals."

Of course, the movie is a satire, the band is fictitious—but fascination with originality is a fact, a fact of our culture. We live in a time and place that places a high priority on being original. The phrase, "That's not very original," is not a complement. Twentieth century American society has a desire, an eagerness for being original. Or the *new* originals. To this context, to us, today's reading from the letter to the Ephesians offers for us a surprising admonition: be imitators.

But it's not just be imitators, but be imitators of God. Just how does one go about imitating God? How are we supposed to imitate a concept, a mystery, an entity beyond our imagining, an entity that is immortal, invisible, all powerful, and omnipresent? It would be hard to imagine, this advice to "imitate God" would be very hard to follow, except for the next part of it, the way the phrase continues: "Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us." It's hard to imagine how to imitate God, but we can imagine how to imitate God in human form, God's beloved child, Jesus, the Christ. God became a person to help us imagine what imitating God is like.

We may not be able to imitate an entity, but we can imitate a person, and we have a book, the Bible, which describes what a person who does that is like. Today's reading from the letter to the Ephesians has a wealth of wonderful directions on this, on how such a person acts, all of which come together, are incorporated into, and concluded by the "therefore" that follows: "Therefore, be imitators of God." All of the admonitions that lead to this "be imitators" are worth attention. Each could be a sermon on its own, (I'm not going to preach a sermon on each one), but there are two that particularly stand out to me today, two descriptions of how to be imitators of God. And these two happen to begin with two "be's" 1) Be angry. And 2) Be kind.

1) Be angry. Maybe this assertion is even more surprising than "be imitators." Be angry? The Bible says be angry? Aren't church people always nice? Sometimes, when people say that about church people, I think they probably haven't had a whole lot of experience in a church. Church people are not always nice. Nor is God. Be angry, Ephesians says, and we can remember that God gets angry. You can find a number of examples of this in the Old Testament. Many people are taken aback by how angry God seems in that first part of the Bible, but God gets angry in the New Testament, too. It's a false claim to call the New Testament the nice part of the Bible, because there are plenty of hard passages in it, too, plenty of angry God there, angry Jesus. There's that story of Jesus overturning the money tables in the Temple. Jesus was very angry, then. Jesus also gets angry when his disciples lack faith. You can practically feel the heat coming off the page in some of those passages. And Jesus gets very, very angry about anyone who would

do something to prevent a child from coming him. Jesus said that if a person does that, a millstone should be tied around that person's neck and they should be thrown in to the sea. Which does not seem all that nice, but certainly catches your attention.

Which is the point of that hard saying. Pay attention to it. Pay attention to the vulnerable. Pay attention. I've seen a bumper sticker that says, "If you're not angry, you're not paying attention." If we pay attention, there's a lot we should be angry about: hypocrisy, discrimination, disregard for the defenseless, unfair distribution of resources. If we but open our eyes to what is happening around us, in our city, in our families, in our hearts, it is there to see, and we should be angry about it. We should be angry about the things that make God angry. God gets angry when we think the gifts we've been given are ours by right or are ours alone. God gets angry when we treat other people as anything other than God's beloved children. God gets angry when we put up any kind of impediments to the lost and the least. We should be angry about all of that, like God is.

Be angry, Ephesians says—and then there's this very important next part: be angry, but do not sin. Sometimes, often times, we'll feel anger, justified anger, righteous anger, but it comes out as sin. Perhaps it's condemning thoughts, or callous actions, or hurtful words. There's admonishment in Ephesians about that, too, about how we should not let evil talk come out of our mouths. Negative speech is destructive, damaging to relationships. Foul language stinks—that's the connotation of the phrases used, in the original language of Ephesians, foul language is smelly, putrid, rotten. People in churches should not be talking like that, they shouldn't be nasty. In that sense that saying about church people is accurate, church people should be nice.

Or, even better, and more Biblical, be kind. That's the second "be" of being imitators of God. 1) Be angry but do not sin and 2) Be kind. Be tenderhearted. That's what Jesus is like. Think of the way that Jesus treated children, the way he welcomed them into his lap and blessed them. Think of the way he had compassion for the crowds, who were like sheep without a shepherd, how he fed all those hungry people,. Think of the people that Jesus spent so much time with, all the outcasts of society, all the people he healed. Jesus is kind, in the same way that God is kind, which is also found in the Old Testament, assertions and examples of God's tenderness, God's lovingkindness. The tenderness of God is shown in things places like the first reading, in the cake that appears before Elijah; the kindness of God is shown in the provision of manna in the wilderness for the wayward and wandering Israelites; the kindness of God is shown in the creation of this rare and precious world in which we live, a world that is wildly and unnecessarily beautiful. All of this a great kindness to us on, on the part of God. We imitate God, when we are kind.

And we imitate God when, as Ephesians says, we put away our anger, even our righteous anger, as God puts it away, and becomes a human being. In Jesus, God puts away God's righteous anger, and forgives us. In the cross, all that is rotten is put away, and instead there is a fragrant offering.

In Jesus, God does a new thing. What God does in Jesus is surprising, and we're invited to be part of it, by imitation. We're invited to imitate God, to forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven us. And here's the really surprising thing about that imitation. The Bible says that, "in Christ, we become a new creation." That is, in Christ, we arrive at what was there from the start. Because of Jesus, we can become what we were created to be. If the band name weren't already taken, we might say in Christ, we become the new originals.