



November 29, 2015

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Hope – Ephesians 5:1-2a

“Be imitators of God.” Or, as Peterson so beautifully recasts, “Watch what God does, and then you do it.” A bold suggestion, don’t you think? Given the state of the world right now, some might argue that imitating God might be letting things run amok. But our God is a God who spreads hope. God is not the problem – God is our hope for something much different indeed. Be imitators of God, says Paul.

Imitation is a part of growing up. We all know the proverb, from eighteenth-century clergyman Charles Colton: “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” Still, imitation is much more than that. Really, imitation, doing what someone else is doing, is the basis on which we learn how to be human, how we develop our personality. We become who we are as unique individuals by taking a bit from here and a bit from there and working it into who we are. We like something about someone else, or we want to be able to do what they do, so we start to do the same thing ourselves, as best we can.

When I was really serious about golf, I took a liking to David Graham, who had just won the US Open and had an unusual swing – a swing that made me almost a half-decent duffer.

The problem is, imitation isn't always a good thing. After all, our model – if human – is imperfect, too.

Any woodworker will tell you that if you want to make a set of something nearly the same, you first make the best cut you can on one piece, then use that piece – and only that piece – as a template to mark out the rest. If you use the last one you just cut, each new piece will be further and further from the original, and you'll have a pile of pieces that won't fit together.

The same is true of people. We may well have been made in God's image, but after a few millennia that image has become distorted. That's why Paul tells us to start with the real deal, the model we were given to start with. Otherwise, well, our imitation can go awry.

Not to mention the reason we're imitating in the first place. Sometimes we imitate just because something seems attractive, looks cool.

My Dad smoked cigarettes when I was young. Pall Malls, unfiltered. He would have said that it was mostly to keep the black flies away, and that *was* a benefit. He was never allowed to smoke indoors, so he probably wasn't hooked on the nicotine – and I can say that

because I remember the day (though not my age) when he and I were doing something in the garage and I said, “I can’t wait until I’m old enough to smoke like you, Daddy!”

He quit on the spot.

We can imitate bad things because they look good.

My uncles on my Mom’s side were all auto mechanics, owned a garage next to my grandparents’ house a hundred yards from where I lived. Cars are cool, right? It was a bright, cold day in Denver on a visit to my brother’s when I mentioned to Dad that my dream career was working on cars. My ears hurt for days after that one – and my Dad was a man of few words.

So, we can imitate things in others that aren’t really us, or our best choices.

A kid in my class was what we now call my “frenemy” growing up. (I called him my “best enemy.”) There were so many little quirks he had that drove me absolutely nuts: he’d stroke his pimply face with his right hand and then shake yours; he’d kind of jiggle into place and shift his weight from side to side when he stood to talk with you; all he could talk about was sports. He made funny noises when he talked, used strange word choices, always was drumming on the edge of his desk with his fingers. Didn’t bother most people, but sure bothered me!

But even though his little idiosyncrasies made me crazy – or maybe *because* they did – I found myself imitating them, however much against my will. I’d use the same catch-phrase he’d picked up, move my hands the way he did, and on and on.

We can imitate without even trying. This one goes to show that if you focus on something, even something bad, it will begin to rub off on you!

So, just what is it that we should be imitating about God? In this world of pain and injustice, should we follow the example of a God who appears to let all this suffering happen? A God who seems to let innocent people die? If that’s the case, it seems like we’re already doing a fine job, because mostly we work real hard at doing just those things!

But is that really what we’re doing, imitating God? Perhaps we’re imitating consequences. Perhaps we’re imitating something we abhor.

Maybe we’re even imitating ourselves, broken, dangerous creatures, not God. After all, what does Peterson say that God does primarily? Look it up, it’s right in front of you. What is it? “Mostly what God does is love you.”

And there’s the difference between God and a humanity that makes poor choices. We imitate people who have power. We imitate people whom God has given the gift of beauty. We imitate people who get

what they want. We even imitate people who are self-destructive – maybe worse, we imitate people who are just plain destructive.

How is it that we can become fascinated by death and cruelty? Is it to solve those very human tendencies of abuse? We may start out that way; but we have a way of corrupting the best motives. Instead, we focus on them until they don't seem so strange or abhorrent, or until we begin to act in these ways ourselves. We imitate what once we didn't like – the plot of many a drama: we become what we hate in someone else.

That's not about God. That's humanity doing its best to stick its collective tongue out and shoot raspberries at the one who spends most of his time and energy loving us, who suffers with every stupid choice we make, who feels the pain we inflict on ourselves and others – but set a rule for himself not to make us into a race of robots but strive to teach us, to lead us to a better, more perfect, more loving and God-like way.

And for this reason, God is the God of hope. Hope is, simply, a reality that we haven't yet experienced. And the hope that God offers is definitely worth imitating, because hope reminds us that the misery we insist on perpetuating is neither the end nor the purpose of humanity. Hope is, in fact, what brings out our best qualities as humans.

And there *are* good qualities in us! You can even imitate God by imitating them, because God put 'em there: selfless love, caring for

others, love for God. But it is so easy to be dragged down the wrong path, particularly when we get together in groups. The physician Lewis Thomas once remarked: “We haven't yet learned how to stay human when assembled in masses.” I have to say, we haven't learned how to stay human when left by ourselves, either. The Westminster Larger Catechism tells us what it is to be human in its opening question and answer: “What is the chief and highest end (the primary purpose) of man (meaning, of course, all of us)? Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.” Does that sound like a God that takes pleasure in our suffering?

Our purpose is not to suffer under the tyranny of a policeman God! Not bear the capricious will of a Master Toymaker! Not to run off and play evil by ourselves!

The best of humanity is like God. But there's a huge gap between that God-stuff and our behavior most of the time.

So our hope this Advent is in what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.” And why? Because those “better angels,” like us, are of God, and worthy of imitation. They are pieces cut from the original, true copies.

And in our God-given ability – even predilection – to imitate, when we do our best to choose what to imitate, we can choose to follow

what's best in others, what we admire, because deep inside we know it to be right and true and holy.

So, don't dwell on the evil around us, which is not of God; that will only drag you down to defensiveness and the evils of selfishness and exclusion. Instead, be imitators of God's love in Christ, which did everything to offer us something worth imitating.

“Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. 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...”

My Advent hope for you is that you learn the extravagant love of Christ, to the glory and enjoyment of God – and the uplifting of all those who will choose to imitate you.