11th Sunday after Pentecost

**“Imitators of God”**

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 / August 8, 2021

**1.**

One of the blessings of living as pastor is to meet good people. For the past twenty-eight years of my ministerial journey, I’ve met many good people. By ‘good people,’ I do not mean those who are nice to me, but those who continue to grow in faith and love. As a spiritual leader, it is a joy to see someone to become a Christian and to be gradually transformed into the image of Christ. Of course, I too need to grow spiritually. Pastors are no exception. Every Christian should strive to be transformed by renewing of our minds, so that we may be able to test and approve God’s will, as Paul commands. (Romans 12:2)

In a sense, Christian history is a history of transformation. The Gospels are full of stories of persons who encountered Jesus and were transformed into a new life. The twelve disciples are those. Zacchaeus is one of those. Paul is the great example of how a person’s life can be changed into a totally new direction. St. Augustine and St. Francis are also the great example of spiritual transformation. How about John Newton, who wrote “Amazing Grace”? He had worked on slave ships in the slave trade. But after experiencing a spiritual conversion in the midst of shipwreck, Newton eventually renounced his trade, became an Anglican priest, and dedicated his whole life as a slave of Christ. We also can recall many names of our fellow Christians who encountered Christ on their ways and were transformed into a totally new life. Further, those who are transformed in Christ transform the world.

The power of Christ is the power of transformation. If we meet the risen Christ, he changes our hearts and minds, our thoughts and attitudes, the direction of our journey, and the purpose of our life. If no change has happened after you met Christ, it means something is wrong with your spiritual journey or with your relationship with Christ. Just think it over. We come to Christ as sinners. He welcomes us, forgives us, and renews our souls. We are justified and sanctified through his grace. As our faith grows, we want to become more like him. This is a general process of being a Christian, and this whole process is a process of transformation into the image of Christ. Then, how can we not experience any changes? If no change has happened yet in your life since you have met Christ, it means that you are still wandering around in the crowds seeking for the wrong object, not longing for the Bread of Life, as I told you two weeks ago.

**2.**

Although it is natural to be transformed as we encounter Christ, the reality is that the transformation does not automatically happen. God is certainly willing to justify us through Christ so that we may live a transformed life, which is a sanctified life. Yet if we do not make any effort to be a new self on our part, the transformation never happens.

In Ephesians, Paul commands us to be transformed in Christ. He says, **“Put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:22-24)**

And he continues to teach us the rules for the new life in today’s scripture reading. I am not going to read it again, but to sum up: First, speak the truth; second, manage your anger; third, work honestly and share what you get; fourth, build others up with good talk; fifth, please God with holy life; lastly, be a good neighbor with kindness and forgiveness. These are not the only touchstones for spiritual transformation. There are many more rules and examples. So, we might be overwhelmed by these rules and think it’s impossible for us to be like Christ. How do we keep all of these rules? Would it really be possible for us to grow into the fullness of Christ?

**3.**

Paul says, **“Therefore, be imitators of God.” (Ephesians 5:1)** We get a hint from this simple statement: Don’t try to keep all those rules fist. Instead, try to imitate God first. Then you will find, on the way, that you are becoming more like him. Many of you may remember Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, ''The Great Stone Face.''

“Ernest lives in a prosperous valley where there is a local mountainside with rocks that strongly resemble a wise and benevolent face. His mother tells him of the local legend that a man whose appearance matches the Great Stone Face will return to the valley. That man is destined to be 'the greatest and noblest personage of his time. Young Ernest is drawn to the tale and hopes fervently that such a man will appear in his lifetime. As he grows up, Ernest spends a good portion of his day in respectful, almost prayerful, contemplation of the Great Stone Face longing for the prophecy being fulfilled. Ernest is middle-aged and has become a well-respected preacher. As time goes on, he witnesses some possible candidates return to the valley. Yet none of them satisfy his expectation. Elderly Ernest has a reputation for wisdom and kindness, and he's known far and wide. A respected poet comes to see him, and together they walk out to a place outdoors where Ernest delivers sermons. As Ernest stands there before his congregation, the poet is struck by the resemblance between Ernest and the Great Stone Face. The poet reveals to the citizens of the valley that Ernest is the prophesied man of wisdom and nobility. The people cheer, but Ernest humbly shrugs it off, still waiting for a wiser man who resembles the Great Stone Face.”

Jesus Christ is the “Great Stone Face” in our spiritual journey. God so wants us to be like him, that he gave us the perfect imitator, Jesus Christ. Athanasius, one of the early church Fathers, said, “God became human so that we might become God.” Jesus himself said, **“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9)** Like Ernest has done, as we continue to spend a good portion of our days in prayerful contemplation of our great imitator of God, Jesus Christ, with longing heart, we will be more like him.

**4.**

When she was little, our daughter used to say to his mom and to others, “I want to be like my dad. I want to be a pastor like him. I want to do exactly the same with what he has done.” I was so happy to hear that. She seemed to know how to please her father. And she taught me how I could please my heavenly Father. As she grew up, she changed her mind and decided not to be a pastor. Maybe she realized that her dad is not the Great Stone Face. Nonetheless, I am not disappointed, for I know she has been living a good life, and I believe that she is still longing for the Great Stone Face, Jesus Christ.

Our heavenly Father truly takes delight in to hearing us saying, “We want to be imitators of God. We want to be like Jesus Christ. We want to live like him and love like him.” As much as we long to be like him, we will be more like him. What a wonderful life would it be if we become imitators of Christ and people see in us something like him? How much can we please our heavenly Father if we continue to want to be like Christ and live like him?

Therefore, friends in Christ, **“let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:2)**, as the writer of Hebrews encourages us, until we **“become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13)**