

## **Sermon**

### **Where do we go from here? Become an Imitator...**

Pastor Lisa Giacomazza

Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Over the summer we've been asking questions with the most recent and most profound – *where do we go from here?* Here being a difficult, unsettled place. Still in the pandemic, still wondering what to do – masks, vaccines – so many questions. And the unrest of our communities – The violence, depression, suicides – all up. I participated in a special Prayer Explosion as it was called – a call to stop the violence on the streets of Niagara Falls – I along with other clergy from the city and church members stood at 19<sup>th</sup> Street and Walnut Avenue and we prayed and we cried to God – asking God to help us take our streets back and make our community safe once again.

Our scripture today from Ephesians is that list of “do’s and don’ts” – of how we should live and what we should do and what we shouldn’t do. It is important to understand that one’s reality of who a person is empowers and is reflected in one’s conduct or what a person does. And as we have grown as Christians, perhaps there was a time when you were a different person than you are now – now that you’ve matured and have a deeper understanding of the meaning of these texts...

Earlier in this letter to the Ephesians, its audience was given an extensive, contrasting overview regarding their former reality and their current reality. They were told in Ephesians 2:11-13:

***“So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” – a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands – remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”***

And here we sit...some of us attending church since we were children. We have been reading scriptures for decades – been to Bible studies, attended lectures, activities of all sorts – to better understand the teachings of Christ – to better adhere to this list of do's and don'ts...and yet...we do fall short so often, don't we? Well, let's dive into it...

***“So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. <sup>26</sup>Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup>and do not make room for the devil.”***

How many of you have held onto anger – or pushed your point of contention by repeating yourself or have tried to gain allies by sharing your thoughts and opinions about the situation or person. I certainly have. And I can see clearly where this makes room for the devil. It breaks down the community. It breaks down families. It tears people apart. The anecdote? Simple but so hard – forgiveness.

***“Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. <sup>2</sup>”***

Have you ever thought- Can't wait for payday so I can share some of my labor with those less fortunate. Yes, many of you tithe so I think that actually you

do think this way – but have you ever looked at the taxes you pay and realize this too is your share to help those in need – you’re paying for Medicaid which supports the incredible cost of nursing home care and provides health insurance for children and young women who can’t work full time. Fire and Police and sewers – we share the burden of those expenses. It might be nice to keep more of our paycheck but much of it goes to serve the community.

And the Bacon Blessing program – where those who are involved spend a ton of their free time and energy and money to give back to those who are in need in our community. Bang on.

***“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up,<sup>[a]</sup> as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”***

But only what is useful for building up. This all really comes down to one thing – and the reason Paul emphasizes these things – it is love of neighbor equals love of self. We cannot be happy when others suffer if we either contribute or fail to alleviate that suffering. Paul is clear about our interrelationship with how one’s reality determines and is reflected in one’s conduct. And this is good news for all of us. These are not difficult “rules” if you will to adhere to. And if you are in a bad place right now – and a lot of people are – it might be time to throw yourself back into helping others...if you can’t physically help, make calls, send cards, write checks. Help ease someone else’s suffering – or just pray – pray for your friends, pray for our church, pray for this community – pray for our country. When we behave as a member of a community and think less of how the

community serves us but more how we serve it, then and only then can we truly be fulfilled and happy. When we think of only ourselves and we don't consider how our behavior effects those around us, that is the Devil's playground right there.

Our Psalm this morning, Psalm 34 does two things...it establishes the author's intention to give a testimony and it provides details of David's experience that prompted the testimony.

*<sup>1</sup> I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.<sup>2</sup> My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad.<sup>3</sup> O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together."*

So the intent of David's praising is to bring the community together through worshiping of God – but a God that has delivered him...he goes onto to say this...

*<sup>4</sup> I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.<sup>5</sup> Look to him, and be radiant; so your<sup>[gl]</sup> faces shall never be ashamed.<sup>6</sup> This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD, and was saved from every trouble."*

David is reaching out to his community to share with them this amazing love that he has found in his God. Testimony – it is a deeply rooted part of our history as a people. To share what we have been blessed with. I have personally heard many of you testify to this love and I have been moved by each and every story. No story is dull, boring or unimportant. Our "where are you from" or "where do you hurt?" questions we pondered. Stay curious about each other because this is

where God is. In those stories – in those testimonies of how God delivered them, loved them, protected them, this is where we find our energy and our motivation – like David – magnify the Lord with me!

But as we live in this reality – this human existence on this planet – we become a bit unrealistic about what we will be spared. God never promised we wouldn't have broken relationships, broken bodies, significant grief and illness – unfortunately these are all part of our experience – and none escape. Some look like they do because they chose to sing like David. They focus on the beauty, on the grace. And it is everywhere.

Our scripture from Ephesians is one offering us a chance to look a little like Jesus – yes, like Jesus. Don't you think you're capable? Don't you know he lives inside all of us? Deliberate imitation sounds insincere or blame-worthy in some ears. But putting on Christ and imitating God are phrases that Pauline thinking repeats out of the knowledge that we grow into the identities we choose to have. We would never argue with anyone's attempt to become an Olympic athlete or a Rock Star or a successful lawyer. We wouldn't shun someone for trying to sing like Mick Jagger? So intentionally following these ideals in our scripture today should be just as natural and sought after.

So go ahead – imitate – imitate the goodness of God. You need only one thing to do it – one thing- to have a love that sacrifices for the good of others. If we get that, we get it all.

*Amen*