



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida
10 Pentecost - Proper 14 - Year B - August 8/9, 2009
Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2; Ps. 34:1-8; John 6:35, 41-51
Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God...(Ephesians 5:1-2)..

When I was in the restaurant business, I had the great privilege of meeting Julia Child. I actually met her more than once. She was a wonderfully warm and gracious woman who had a huge personality and an absolute *joie de vivre*...Her influence on the American food scene cannot be overstated.

On one occasion, when I was on staff of a New York restaurant called Buds, I was working as the expeditor in the kitchen, meaning I was calling off the orders to the cooks on the line. The chef/owner was a guy named Jonathan Waxman who was pretty well known. For those of you who are Food Channel fans, this was one of the restaurants where Bobby Flay got his start. In fact, Bobby Flay was one of the line cooks I was shouting orders to the on one of the nights that Julia Child dined with us. Buds was a multi-layered restaurant with an open kitchen. The restrooms were located downstairs and you literally had to walk past the open kitchen to get to them.

On this particular evening, the sous chef had just put a full loin of pork on a cutting board in the work area in front of me, to slice it in preparation for grilling. Just as she was slicing the loin of pork, we heard the inimitable voice of Julia Child. She was looking down at us from the stairs leading to the rest rooms. "*What a lovely piece of beef!*" she said, smiling and nodding her head in approval. The sous chef slicing the loin of pork, was a sweetheart and very wise. She just looked up at Julia, smiled at her and said, "Yes it is, isn't it." And Julia kept walking downstairs. When she was out of earshot, we all burst out laughing. It became our inside joke, "What a lovely piece of beef."

Well, the loin of pork was fresh and beautiful and pink. Julia was getting on in years and looking down from a little bit of distance. She had also had a couple of glasses of wine, so her mistaking the loin of pork for a "lovely piece of beef" was understandable. I really admired her, though. She was a big woman with a bigger than life personality and she was always a pleasure to serve.

Susan and I saw *Julie and Julia* on Friday evening. The story is, in part, about Julia Child, who is played by Meryl Streep. Meryl Streep is brilliant. What an actress she is. She has Julia Child down pat and you can tell she had a blast playing the role. "Imitation," it is said, "is the highest form of flattery." Well, Meryl Streep pays Julia Child high praise indeed –

mannerisms, voice, looks, the whole package. She is Julia Child and the movie is great fun. Go see it.

Imitation as the highest form of flattery....*Therefore be imitators of God*, today's reading from Ephesians urges us (Eph. 5:1). Wow! Be imitators of God. What would that look like?

Ephesians doesn't leave much room for doubt. The sentence continues, *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us a fragrant offering...*(5:1-2)

To be imitators of God is to live in love, as Christ loved us....Sounds easy enough, but of course it isn't so easy. Love can be hard work. Love can be a challenge, especially the kind of love that imitates God, which lives in love as Christ loved, and loves, us. This kind of love is enormously abundant and generous, abundant and generous beyond all bounds. It's the kind of love Paul describes in chapter 13 of his 1st letter to Corinthians, in that encomium to love that is read at so many weddings, "*Love is patient and kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends*" (1 Cor. 13:4-8).

Love without limits. Love without boundaries. To imitate God is to imitate that kind of boundless love. To live in love as Christ loved us, is to live into that limitless kind of love. It's about grace, real grace: grace that comes from God; grace that imitates God. Mind you, I am not saying that boundaries and limits are not necessary in our lives, they are necessary. I am saying, however, that our capacity to love should know no boundaries. It is an important distinction.

In a wonderful book titled, *If God is Love: Rediscovering Grace in an Ungracious World* Quaker pastors and co-authors Philip Gulley and James Mulholland are insightful and help clarify this when they speak of the concept of grace. "I believe in grace," they write in the first person singular. "Now by grace, I don't mean a wishy-washy, whatever goes approach in which one belief is as good as another. I don't mean an attitude that ignores differences and tolerates every idea. Critics are right, to label such thinking as lazy and indulgent."¹

"What I mean by grace, Gulley and Mulholland continue, "is a commitment to the most difficult and demanding of human acts – engaging and loving those who think and behave in ways we find unacceptable. Grace is the unfailing commitment to love all persons, regardless of their beliefs. Only grace makes it possible for those who believe differently to respect and relate to one another. Grace allows us to disagree, to challenge the damaging beliefs of others even as we are challenged, and to do this without violating the autonomy and dignity of others. Grace empowers us to embrace deeply divergent convictions even as we embrace one another. We love one another as God loves us – graciously."²

Gulley and Mulholland offer an important elaboration, "Love and grace are not synonymous," they write. "Nearly everyone believes God is loving, but there is considerable debate over the width, length, height and depth of this love. For many, God's love is limited and conditional, offered to some and not to others. They believe God's love is reserved for the elect and bestowed on the obedient. God's love becomes a reward, not a divine commitment. Grace, in contrast, is not connected to our behavior, 'He saved us not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.' Grace is God's commitment to love us regardless."³

Mulholland and Gulley conclude, "This kind of love echoes throughout history in the words and lives of many religious leaders. It was the kind of love Jesus modeled and taught. It was a love offered for outcast sinners, and the unloved. It was love for both neighbor and

enemy. Jesus said, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you should love one another.'"⁴

It's critical to note that Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another (See John 15:12). How often we need to be reminded that loving one another is a command, not an option. The experience of community, and especially Christian community -- in our families, in our churches, in our neighborhoods -- is frequently the hard and painful work of loving graciously, even in the face of ungraciousness, or when we are not feeling especially loving ourselves; in fact, most particularly when we are not feeling especially loving ourselves.

Today's reading from Ephesians offers some guidance about how this kind of graciousness might be lived: *So then, putting away all falsehood let all of us speak to the truth to our neighbors, for we are members one of another. Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down upon your anger, and do not make room for the devil....Let not evil talk come out of your mouth, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you* (Eph. 4:25 – 32).

"For we are members one of another...." it says in these verses (Eph 4:25). How vital it is to remember this, to remember it always. *For we are members one of another.*

As many of you know, the theme of the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, held in Anaheim in July was *Ubuntu*. Some of you have read Michael Battle's book on Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a concept that comes out of Africa. A specifically Christian Ubuntu theology has been developed by and lived out in the ministry and witness of Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

In his book *God has a Dream*⁵, Tutu explains his understanding of Ubuntu when he writes, "Our humanity is caught up in one another's...The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation. In Africa recognition of our interdependence is called *Ubuntu* in Nguni languages and *botho* in Sotho."⁶

"It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught inexplicably up in yours....It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with *Ubuntu* is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong to the greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished, when others are oppressed...treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of *Ubuntu* gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human, despite all efforts to dehumanize them."⁷

From an *Ubuntu* perspective, all persons have need of one another. No one may say to another, "I have no need of you." This is also scriptural. Think of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians about the Body of Christ... *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ...Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body..."* (1 Cor.12:12 – 17).

Desmond Tutu goes even further than this. He carries the human connectedness and interdependence of human beings called for by the principles of Ubuntu beyond the church to a universal understanding about all people. “In God’s family,” Tutu declares, “there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Hindu, Pakistani and Indian – all belong.”⁸

Now perhaps this seems “pie in the sky” to you, something idealistic and impossible, but Desmond Tutu lives it in his life, each and every day. And Desmond Tutu lived it throughout the evil of apartheid when he stood up to the government of South Africa, stood up for the human dignity of people who were being treated in ways few of us could imagine. But throughout his opposition to apartheid, Desmond Tutu refused to dehumanize his opponents. In fact, he prayed for them. Throughout it all, Desmond Tutu persisted in love.

You and I cannot control how others behave, act, think and feel in the world, but we can control how we behave, act, think and feel. There is so much anger, so much polarization, just look at the ugliness taking place over health care reform, at the screaming and shouting and hatred being shown. Politicians cannot even speak on the subject without being shouted down. Is not this the kind of behavior, when we refuse to see the image of God in one another, that grieves the Holy Spirit? It is blasphemy, absolute blasphemy. There has to be a better and more excellent way.

Be imitators of God as beloved children of God....Live in love as Christ loved us, it says in today’s reading from Ephesians....Imitating God....Living in love as Christ loved us...What a high form of flattery...What a high form of flattery both to God and to ourselves who are created in the image and likeness of God....It is indeed, the better and more excellent way. It is the way of that one who is our bread of life (John 6:35)....May we eat of this bread always and experience the life, the abundant, eternal life of love, into which it calls us....

Bon appetit!

¹ Gulley, Philip and Mulholland, James *If God is Love: Rediscovering Grace in an Ungracious World* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 7

² Gulley and Mulholland, 7

³ Gulley and Mulholland, 8

⁴ Gulley and Mulholland, 8

⁵ Tutu, Desmond *God has a Dream* (New York, London, etc: Doubleday Books, 2004)

⁶ Tutu, p. 25-26

⁷ Tutu, p. 26

⁸ Tutu, p. 20