

Psalm 51:1-17, Ephesians 5:1-2
“Imitators of God”

It is so difficult to be different in this world today. It seems as if we are almost programmed to tow the line and to follow the lead and imitate that which the rest of society does around us. When a person steps out of line or marches to the beat of a different drummer they are either ridiculed, lose respect from those around them, or even worse considered as a candidate for institutional living. Living in Russia you expect that, but not necessarily here in the States.

Whether you realize it or not today, by being here today you are being different. You are expressing not just to yourself and to those in the church today but to those with whom you come into contact today that you are different. You are proclaiming that you march to the beat of a different drummer. Throughout the day today you will have people who will stop you and try to wipe off the dirt, the smudge, the grease or whatever they may think it is off of your forehead. Today, more than any other day, you will have repeated opportunities to explain why you received these ashes upon your forehead. Today you will have an opportunity to proclaim that you are a follower of Jesus Christ and if ever your actions don't reflect that fact then you want them to let you know.

Ash Wednesday is traditionally the start of our Lenten season. This time of year when we remember the great sacrifice that Christ made for us in his becoming one of us, in his life of service, in his criminal death on the cross, and finally leading us to his glorious resurrection. Paul tells us in Ephesians that we are to be imitators of God. Does this mean that we are to imitate the life of Christ in his suffering and in his death. No it does not because Christ promises us life that is abundant and overflowing. Well, then what does it mean when Paul tells us to be imitators of God?

The next verse tells us. Live in love. We are commanded to live in love. Those who live in love are different. They make decisions not based upon what people will say or think but rather based upon what God would say or think. People who live in love have put away their old life of living for themselves and have decided to live for Christ. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote in Maud “ah for a man to arise in me, that the man I am may cease to be.” Psalm 51 we hear David beseeching God to create a new heart in him. He asks to make him an imitator of God's loving presence here on this earth. This

Lenten season we are called to be different. We will leave the sanctuary today with marks on our forehead that will distinguish us from the rest of society.

Allow that mark to be for you a witness to your own desire to be different in that you want to be governed not by your own selfish desires but rather by God's ambitions for us. There is no other person who walked this earth who was more different than Jesus of Nazareth. He changed the world not by violence and conquering with military might but by as Paul states, by a life of love. Christ loved us so much that he gave himself up for us as a sacrifice to God. These are Paul's words. This is what we ought to imitate.

Our lives ought to be imitations of God as we saw reflected in the life of Christ. This life which was so dramatically different than that which was common to that day. If you think it is hard to be different today, imagine what it must have been like to be different in the days of Jesus. Criticism of the church or of political leaders was a sure way to find ones death. Jesus had to speak in parables so that not all people would be able to understand and bring him to trial.

The life of a Christian ought to be different, but we are loathe to take that journey. I want to challenge you this lent to begin your journey with the goal of being different not just this Wednesday but for the rest of the season and ultimately for the rest of our life. What have we done lately that has made us different from those around us and made us stand out as followers of Christ? For many of us we would much rather blend in as wallpaper. Ash Wednesday is a day that we move out of our comfort zone because we can't blend in, the marks on our foreheads are a sign that we refuse to blend in and allow culture, pressures, and anything else take the lead in dictating our lives.

Nearly 600 years ago Thomas A Kempis transcribed a book called "The Imitation of Christ" which next to the Bible is the second most read book in literary history. In this very simple and straightforward work we hear the importance of following Christ by imitating his life of love so that we too can be imitators of God. May God bless you and keep you and let his face shine upon you so that we may all live as imitators of Christ, from this day forward. Amen.