

DISCOVERING YOUR TRUEST, BEST SELF; EPHESIANS 4:25-5:2; AUGUST 9, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

What is the essence of a thing? *Writer's Almanac* yesterday had poem of a father driving his estranged fifteen-year-old son home from a friend's house; the boy was looking up at the moon, humming an old song about the moon the father didn't realize the boy knew; the father would have hummed along with him but he didn't want his son to stop. Somehow that poem captured *the essence* of parental longing for connection to a wayward child. Poetry does that – captures the essence of things.

Or this: years ago I participated in a small group committed to honesty, integrity and tough love; we compared the experience in that group to the peeling away of the layers of an onion. We cover our lives with layers of falsehood and avoidance with old scripts from childhood or narratives we concoct that are little more than excuses for behavior that lacks courage, honesty and integrity. That group helped me peel a few layers away and get closer to what felt like my true self, the essence of me.

We're talking today about Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He urges us to choose the life we learned in Christ versus the life of darkness. Either we can put on our old life or our new life. "Put away wrath, bitterness, anger, wrangling, slander and malice," he says and "forgive as you have been forgiven." In other words, be your truest, best self.

Paul talks this way because preceding today's lesson he reminds the Ephesians that there is one God, one faith, and one baptism. So there is one life to live – an enlightened life, a better life, a whole life. Then, as now, humans struggled with the tension between their best and something less. Paul speaks to the heart of daily living.

Last week we said there is magnanimity and grace to our faith. In that spirit it's important to say that this new life to which we are called is not a life Christians own or have a corner of the market on. This new life is the life to which all of God's people, all of the human family are called; all of the great faith traditions seek it, all of them have practices that lead to it.

For simplicity sake let's call it living in darkness or living in light. The practices and rituals of the great religions lead to enlightened living where we discover our truest and best selves. One editorial comment: while I refer to other religious traditions I think it is difficult, if not impossible, to existentially understand any religion if we do not practice it daily. For us, then, it makes sense to speak in Christian terms.

What Paul is saying is: "now that your eyes have been opened; live the life to which you have been called." His urging does not expect something beyond their capacity.

Nor is putting away wrath, bitterness, anger and practicing forgiveness unique to Christians, yet Christians do have a unique way to achieve those goals – his name is Jesus.

Jesus is the one who demonstrated, for us, what living in the light, the life of enlightenment, looks like. Do what Jesus did and we will be on the right track, headed in the right direction.

Paul continues, “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ has forgiven you*. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, *as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us*.”

That word “imitators” brings all of those admonitions together. Perhaps you’ve heard about David McCullough’s new book about the Wright Brothers – it offers an illustration of what Paul means by imitation.

The story goes that when Orville was ill with typhoid fever, to comfort him, Wilbur read to Orville about Otto Lilienthal – a German glider enthusiast. Lilienthal had successfully achieved flight with a glider, an aircraft without an engine. The descriptions of his experiments captivated the Wright brothers, it was just the medicine Orville needed.

After his recovery, the brothers began reading extensively about birds and flying. They weren’t the only ones; Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison and Samuel Langley among others were making their own investigations.

Orville and Wilbur had no formal technical training or funds but they went to work creating their first glider; basically a large kite with a bamboo skeleton, struts with cross wires, and a system of control cords for the pilot to steer.

Because of the wind needed to launch and keep it aloft the brothers did an extensive study for a location with good weather and consistent wind velocity. Their search identified the southern coast of the eastern states so they pored through Weather Bureau records and zeroed in on a strip of land in the Outer Banks called Kitty Hawk. Isolated, accessible only by boat, they set up camp, literally tents and cook stoves with jugs of water since none was available. Nights were cold, storms not infrequent and supplies often ran out.

What they first realized is that they needed to spend time observing birds to learn everything they could about how they flew. One islander recalled how Wilbur and Orville would watch gannets, a common sea bird, and imitate their wings with their arms and hands. “We thought they were crazy” he said, “but we admired the way they moved their arms and bent their elbow and wrist bones just like the birds.”

Birds have vaulted wings, or camber; by slight movements at the tips of their wings they can change direction and altitude. By warping the outer part of their glider wings slightly the Wrights discovered they could control flight and balance. Finally, in 1903, the brothers developed, with help, a lightweight gasoline engine, fitted the plane and achieved the first powered flight.

Fast forward to Le Havre, France 1908. The French government had offered 1 million francs for a plane that could meet specific altitude, range and speed. By this time others were in the hunt; yet, the Wright brothers were the only ones who consistently put a powered plane aloft. After setting up shop in France, almost five years since the first historic flight at Kitty Hawk, they announced that they were ready to demonstrate the ability of their aircraft. On August 8, 1908 the gleaming white plane was rolled out of its shed and Wilbur confidently announced to the skeptical crowd “Gentlemen, I am going to fly.”

The disregard and suspicion with which they held – as bluffers and frauds – vanished when the plane took off to cheers from the large crowd. It then turned, and came flying back toward the mass of people. Wilbur maneuvered the plane gracefully, made several complete circles and landed gently within yards of where he had started. The crowd went wild.

I tell this story because it is a fitting metaphor for Paul’s message to us today – be imitators of God in Christ. Remember, the first thing the Wright brothers did was to study, then imitate the birds. It was this, perhaps more than any other component of their project development, that gave them a significant lead over their rivals and led to their success.

The image of the two of them in their white shirts and bowler hats dancing, arms akimbo, like birds, on the beach at Kitty Hawk would make a dramatic scene in a feature length movie. Learning the nuance and subtleties of the gannet in flight then transferring that knowledge into the materials and mechanism of a winged aircraft is what ensured they could fly farther, faster and with more skill than anyone else.

What’s the connection with St. Paul’s admonition this morning? Is there any other way to discover our truest, best self than to study the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus of Nazareth, then imitate him. One of the great spiritual classics of all time by Thomas a Kempis is entitled, “The Imitation of Christ.”

AA has a saying, “fake it till you make it.” If you feed the hungry, visit the sick, clothe the naked you somehow become a better person, a Christ-like person.

If we really want to fly in our relationships, in the difference we can make to the community, righting wrongs and injustices, binding-up the wounded, we would do well to study Jesus’ life as closely and intensely as the Wright brothers studied and imitated the birds: examining *his* words and actions, but also the conduct of *others* who call him Lord and Savior. Study, experiment, go back to the drawing board, innovate and try again. Meet failure with confidence; ‘what would he do?’ is the question. Then with the courage of those brothers from Dayton, Ohio climb in and use the wings of faith to fly, to negotiate the wind and weather of this complex, challenging world.

That’s why, like the Wright brothers who had a devoted cadre of supporters and assistants, we can’t do this alone. That’s why Christian community is so important. To care for and hold one another accountable but also to help and inspire.

This past week I observed several examples of Christ like behavior right here.

A member of this congregation making his final journey, accompanied by two men who have been at his side every step of the way; another church member organizing volunteers to accumulate sweat equity hours for a family to acquire a Habitat for Humanity house; a church member who has made it possible for our ENERGY children to have a summer program; Dr. Myron Glick of Jericho Rd. Ministries starting a second African medical mission, this one in Congo for children and inviting us to join him, be on his team.

Maybe a church is really nothing more than a research and development facility for learning and then teaching others how to fly, how to reach for their best, how to use the wings God gave them.

We can sit on the sidelines or stand in the skeptical crowd who showed up that day on the race track at Le Mans to witness what many thought would be a dramatic crash; or we can imagine ourselves soaring as individuals and as a congregation – being the presence of Christ in the world.

It's easy to get distracted or look at the odds against our becoming great; against our being our best; it's easy just to stay home; to fritter and fragment our lives in anxious pursuit of lesser goals and rewards. But that's not what Paul had in mind for the Ephesians or for us.

My guess is each of us here today has some arena in our lives where we long to take off and soar like an eagle –

some challenge that can only be met with our best self –

so let's go ahead, roll up our sleeves, and learn to fly! Amen.