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Ephesians 5:25-5:2

Until COVID-19 changed all of our patterns last year,

- a group of congregations from around the Virginia Synod sponsored the
 - Junior High Servant Event, -
 - a week of service, faith formation, and fun -
 - for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders -
 - in the first years of the event,
 - the group slept in the fellowship hall
 - at St. Michael, Virginia Beach -
 - and then the group moved to the fellowship hall
 - at Good Shepherd, Virginia Beach, - -
 - but regardless of where the group was housed
 - the event always focused on issues around
 - food insecurity and those experiencing homelessness
- The projects,
 - as you might imagine,
 - changed from year to year,
 - but one of the most memorable projects for me-
 - involved going out to the Eastern shore
 - to pick food for those who were food insecure.
 - Bill, the farmer who was sharing his fields, was a wonderful man of faith.

- He and some of the other farmers in the area
 - grew crops to give away
 - and allowed groups like ours to come help with the harvest.
- We had the chance to work with Bill for about three summers,
 - and one thing that impressed me
 - was Bill's ability to teach the kids -
 - to teach me -
 - how to figure out what should and should not be picked.
- For most of our crew,
 - when they showed up at Bill's farm,
 - it was the first time they have ever been that close to a field of crops -
 - we were novice crop pickers to be sure -
 - who need a little guidance,
 - a little direction,
 - an example to follow -
 - so Bill would take us out into the field -
 - and show us what to do.
 - I can still remember the time he was teaching us
 - how to tell if a watermelon was ripe -
 - and decided to give the kids a taste of fresh picked watermelon
 - he barely touched the watermelon with his knife
 - and it popped open -
 - then he cut slices for everyone to enjoy -

- I remember him teaching us the difference -
- between the top of an asparagus plant -
- and a weed. -
- The lesson,
- the example -
- was usually short and to the point, -
- but it is effective and clear.
- And I remember that Bill didn't simply head back to work -
- after giving the lessons,
- he stayed right there with us
- to offer additional words of guidance, -
- to help us understand
- what's a weed -
- and what's worth saving - -
- stayed with us
- to lend a hand
- when we aren't sure where to go next. -
- Bill's generous spirit,
- Bill's guidance,
- Bill's example -
- made it possible for our group of beginner harvesters
- to pick thousands of pounds of food for hungry people
- Now 2000 years ago -

- as the good news about Jesus
 - was spreading through towns and villages -
 - all around the Mediterranean,
 - The faithful spirit,
 - the guidance,
 - the example of the Apostle Paul
 - helped make it possible for thousands of people -
 - to pick up the story of Jesus
 - to begin their journey
 - as a follower of Christ
 - and like our friend Bill,
 - the Apostle Paul -
 - didn't simply give them a few words of instruction from on high - -
 - no, Paul brought them this bread of life -
 - Paul shared with them the love and teachings of Jesus -
 - in many cases -
 - staying with groups
 - for an extended period of time -
 - to help them understand
 - what it looked like to follow Jesus
 - to live as a child of God in the world -
 - and then,
 - even when he moved on to share the story with another group of people,

- Paul was available through letters -
 - to continue to answer questions,
 - to offer guidance,
 - to give examples of what it means
 - to be God's people in the daily life.
- And it is one of those letters,
 - that we read from today -
 - a letter which offers guidance,
 - offers examples for God's people,
 - on what it looks like to follow Jesus.
 - The examples offered in the letter to the Ephesians,
 - are simple and direct, - -
 - this is not a 200 page thesis on Christian living. -
 - No, these are direct,
 - straightforward examples and statements -
 - meant to help God's people see what it looks like
 - to follow Jesus on a daily basis -
 - straightforward examples,
 - meant I think,
 - not to try and cover everything,
 - but rather there to help us learn -
 - what a faithful life looks like -
 - so that we can make good decisions

- about how to live
 - and treat one another
 - on a daily basis.
- Here are just a few of the words of guidance we heard a few moments ago -
 - “Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors . . .
 - Be angry but do not sin . . .
 - Thieves must give up stealing;
 - rather let them labor and work honestly
 - with their own hands . . .
 - Let no evil talk come out of your mouths,
 - but only what is useful for building up . .
 - Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and
 - anger and wrangling and slander . .
 - Be kind to one another, tenderhearted,
 - forgiving one another,
 - as God in Christ has forgiven you.”(Eph 4:25-32)
- As I said,
 - none of these examples is very long, -
 - but each of them points us toward the type of life -
 - that followers of Jesus are called to live, -
 - a life transformed
 - by the boundless love of God -
 - a life shaped

- by the promise of forgiveness and eternal life

- we receive in the waters of baptism -

- a life guided

- by the teachings and examples of Jesus. -

These words to the Ephesians,

- it seems to me,

- aren't asking us to be perfect -

- Nowhere does Paul say -

- does Jesus say -

- "Now be sure you don't ever make a mistake."

- We live

- in an imperfect world.

- we all make mistakes -

- perfection isn't possible. -

- Our farmer friend Bill knew

- when he put a bunch of pastors and middle school kids in the field

- that we would probably pick a few watermelons that weren't ripe

- and that me might occasionally mistake an asparagus plant

- for a weed,

- But he gave us instructions. - -

- He gave us a few examples of what we needed to do.

- He was present with us to help us.

- He gave us the opportunity to make mistakes and learn -

- and with his support, -
 - we did a reasonably good job
 - of harvesting watermelons, asparagus, potatoes and more.
- This letter to the Ephesians,
 - it seems to me has the same approach that Bill used with us - -
 - the text says - -
 - be “imitators of God”
 - inviting us to
 - learn the patterns,
 - learn the rhythms,
 - learn the general concepts
 - that make up a Godly life -
 - and to incorporate those practices
 - into our daily lives. - -
 - Inviting us to
 - let the Spirit work through your hearts and hands and voices
 - to reflect to the world around us,
 - the compassion and hope we have received through Jesus. . . .
 - Inviting us to
 - practice kindness and forgiveness,
 - try to give up bitterness, anger and wrath
 - to look for opportunities to build up, not tear down
 - to speak truth, even when it is tough,

- and to share grace. - -
- Will we make mistakes along the way? -
 - Will we fall short from time to time?
 - Of course we will, - -
 - but as we live out those faithful patterns in our lives
 - as we imitate the type of life Jesus lived, - - - -
 - hopefully we will live more fully in the love of God
 - and be better able to share that love with others.
- And hopefully -
 - the more we practice God's love in our daily lives, -
 - the easier it will be for us -
 - to respond in faithful, Godly ways -
 - when we are faced with situations that crop up in our lives
 - that aren't addressed directly in the letter
 - to the Ephesians
 - or elsewhere in scripture.
 - For as I learned picking different crops with Bill,
 - with a little instruction,
 - a good example to follow,
 - and the support of a helpful mentor -
 - it is amazing what can be accomplished. -
 - Thankfully,
 - as children of God, -

- we have the guidance of scripture,
 - we have countless examples of faithfulness,
 - and we have the support of the Spirit -
 - and of our siblings in Christ -
- to help us
 - as we seek to imitate Christ
 - and be more fully God's faithful people,
 - following Jesus
 - through our words, our actions, our lives.

