

The Rev. Dr. Cornel Barnett
 Redwoods Presbyterian Church
 Larkspur, California
 Ephesians 4:25-5:2
 "Imitating God"

I'm amazed that I titled this sermon "imitating God." I did it spontaneously two months ago when I planned the summer services for publication in the Redwoods Log.

It's absurd really. How does one imitate the Numinous God which we experience as mysterious and awesome as spoken by Rudolf Otto? How do we imitate the ground of our being as stated by Paul Tillich?

The Hebrew Bible name for God YHWH couldn't be pronounced so other names were given for God such as *HaShem* which simply meant "the Name." How do we imitate something that cannot be pronounced?

The title of this sermon came from the text just read. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul writes: "...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, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

For Paul, qualities of kindness, tenderheartedness and forgiveness are qualities of God. In imitating these qualities we imitate God. To live in love as Christ loved us (that's a tall order) is to be God-like.

Descending from the complexity of defining God at the outset I'm going to go with Paul and trust that he has a firm handle on God in this instance and in imitating God in these simple ways we affirm a more than adequate spirituality.

This sermon initially sought examples of kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness and living in Christ's love as a composite of how we can imitate God and be good Christians but that was too much for one sermon. Each attribute can be a sermon so I've gone with kindness and tenderheartedness as representatives of God-like characteristics.

I looked for examples in our recent vacation. Before we left I wrote simple dictionary definitions of the words and I trusted that I would see examples of these along the way.

The Encarta Dictionary defines kindness as "the practice of being sympathetic and compassionate. It's an act that shows consideration and caring." Tenderheartedness is "quick to feel or show compassion and sympathy for other people." It's heartfelt kindness.

Suellen and I heard the Garrison Keillor of Indiana, Philip Gulley, at one of the remaining country family gatherings called "Chautauqua" near Suellen's Indiana hometown of Rensselaer. Later, I read his chapter on "kindness" in his book *Hometown Tales*. In a story called "Kindness Bestowed," he writes:

“Right before I was born, my parents bought a house on Martin Drive in one of our town’s first subdivisions. No front porch, no trees, just a cookie-cutter box on a postage-stamp lawn. Still, the neighborhood had its charms. We lived next door to Mark Nickerson, the town’s oddest child. Mark would eat dirt out of our flower beds. He’d come home from school, his mouth ringed with white dust from gnawing on chalk. Mom said Mark was probably lacking something in his diet, though his diet seemed fine to me. Every morning his mother fed him cupcakes and Coke. I would stand at their front door, peering through the screen, imploring them to invite me in for breakfast.

“Around the corner from us lived the Wrights and the Chalfants. Mr. Wright sold Knapp shoes and had a sign in front of his house inviting folks to come in and try on a pair. One day Mr. Wright caught a snapping turtle that had wandered into his yard and invited us to his house the next day for turtle soup. He was all the time cooking up any wildlife unfortunate enough to cross his path. After a while the beasts of the field learned to cut a wide swath around his home. Dale Chalfant worked with his dad, Lemmie, in the plumbing business. Dale would walk over to our house once a month and sit in the kitchen with a towel over his shoulders while my mother cut his hair. In exchange, Dale would unclog our pipes for free.

“The Myerses and the Blaydeses resided two empty lots away. I’ll never forget how my mom and Mrs. Blaydes stood in those lots holding each other and crying the day the Myers boy got killed on his motorcycle on North Salem Road. Inabelle Keen was a nurse and in her off-hours mended our scrapes. She would reach deep in her black bag and paint us with various healing balms. But when the Myers boy died, not even Inabelle Keen and her black bag could set things right.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bolton lived down the street from us with their two sons. On summer evenings, Mr. Bolton would back his car out of his garage, set up his reel-to-reel projector and screen, arrange three rows of folding chairs, and show cartoons to the neighborhood kids. He would wear a path between the kitchen and garage, plying us with popcorn and soda pop. We would sit in the folding chairs and watch Mickey and Pluto and Donald.

“We moved from that neighborhood when I was eight years old. Even then I knew that Mr. Bolton and Inabelle Keen were rare birds; the chances my new neighborhood would duplicate them were slim. Sure enough, there were no more summer-evening cartoons in a garage, no more balms in black bags, no more turtle soup. Still, other acts of kindness were bestowed: the widow Bryant and her snickerdoodle cookies, Mrs. Harvey doling out Juicy Fruit, Lee and Mary Lee Comer wallpapering our kitchen the year of the blizzard.

“Not long ago I was lamenting how kindness is a relic. If an old man invites neighborhood kids to watch cartoons, we suspect evil things of him. Emergency rooms have taken the place of the Inabelle Keens. Folks who hang wallpaper are found in the Yellow Pages, not next door.

But then I remembered how when our apple trees needed trimming, Mr. Austin broke out his saw. When my sons were short a football, Mrs. Evens across the street came up with

a spare. When the days were hot, the Bakers opened their pool. When my faucet was leaking, Mr. Stewart came to our door with his magic wrench. When we came back from vacation, Ray Davis had mowed our lawn. And when our little boy Spencer was operated on, Denise and Dolores from church cried in the waiting room.

"A long time ago, Elijah the prophet hermitted himself away in a cave and moaned to God how rotten the world had turned. But God knew differently and spoke of thousands of virtuous folk he was proud to call his own.

"Kindness thrives. It's awareness that's on the wane."

My antenna was up during our vacation and I am happy to report that I found much more kindness in the world than unkindness. The people in "We the people" are mostly kind and therefore I saw more of God out there than Godlessness which makes one wonder where violence, hate and greed come from in the world at large.

I saw kindness and tenderheartedness in the obituary of one of Suellen's class-mates whose family stated: "In memory of Toney, we ask that you perform an act of kindness to your fellow neighbor." I saw it in Suellen's sister Jane when visiting the family cemetery. She placed a potted flower back into its pot which had fallen from a neighbor's tombstone and returned it to its rightful place. Kindness came in flight attendants who offered free drinks for a shorted overhead light or because the plane was delayed.

We imitate God by being kind, tenderhearted and forgiving. We imitate God by living in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. We imitate God simply by being kind and tenderhearted. It's a drop in the ocean but it's a doorway into the heart of God and of being God's person in the world. Amen.