I was at the mall not long ago and a storefront there was in the process of turning over from one merchant to another. The windows were covered with paper and a colorful message banner hung there…WORK IN PROGRESS, PLEASE PARDON OUR APPEARANCE WHILE WE CREATE SOMETHING NEW. As I passed by I could hear a lot of activity going on in there; saws buzzing and the banging of nails, and rock music from a radio adding to the cacophony. I found myself wishing that I could take a peek behind the barrier at the mysterious “new something” that was taking shape.

In this portion of the Pauline letter to the Ephesians we encounter a playbook for change. At first glance, this might simply look like a list of do’s and don'ts for individuals living in community. And in that context they are worth taking to heart. Don’t lie; do speak the truth, be angry, but don’t become your anger, don’t steal and do be of service. That’s good advice in any context.

It builds on the exhortation we heard in last week’s selection from Ephesians. *“You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with your new self, created according to the likeness of God…”*

In truth, these do’s and don’ts serve as preparation for members of the young Christian community preparing to be baptized, and they also serve as a reminder for the members that have already been grafted into the Body of Christ.

The writer of Ephesians wants the hearers of the letter to make the connection between the their relationship with God through new life in Christ, and carry it into their relationships in community and beyond. These “rules” are more than simply suggestions for better living, they assume a new state of being in Christ that makes such changes, not only possible, but inevitable, as they are now indelibly marked with the seal of God’s Spirit.

And the reality of change is that it takes time and effort. There is often a big lag of time between inner change and outer change and for some, if not most of us, it takes a lifetime. As Martin Luther once wrote *“At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.”* That is the world where the Ephesians find themselves. Some members of the Body are bitter, some have anger issues, and others talk trash about their neighbors. And others are doing pretty well. It is in this context that the author writes to the church community, “*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.”*

Imitators of God…. Imitators of God. As I was thinking about this passage I wondered about the notion of being an imitator. I’ve heard it said that imitation is the purest form of flattery. I remember watching a White House Correspondent’s dinner, where then President George W. Bush stood side by side with presidential impersonator Steve Bridges. The two “W’s” alternated back and forth, telling jokes and making good fun of themselves. There were times when it was difficult to tell who was imitating who. I re-watched it last evening on You Tube and it’s well worth the time, especially if you need a good laugh. Webster’s dictionary offers this definition, “An imitator is a person who copies the behaviors or actions of another.” Synonyms include emulator, follower, and mimic.

I also looked up the word Impostor – “A person who pretends to be or represent someone or something else in order to deceive others….” A pretender, trickster, hoaxer, and swindler.

Interestingly enough, the online Webster Dictionary also provides a graph of statistical the usage of a particular a word over time, in this case from the 1800’s to the present. It was a little disconcerting to note that the use of *imitator* has decreased over time as the use of the term *impostor* has increased by nearly the same amount over the same time frame, with a steep curve upward in the last few decades.

This nugget of information might be neither here nor there, but I daresay, we would aspire to be imitators as opposed to impostors when it comes to living into our new state of being in God. Paul, over and over in his writing and preaching urges people to believe because he believes; for them to see how Jesus has transformed even him, and then to act “as if” they too believed it was possible for them…… Kind of a “fake it till you make it” way of moving forward.

Perhaps it may sound like a mis-match in terms, but I believe what we aspire to be is *authentic* in our imitation, even when we aren’t sure of our level of belief in the process at the present time. I think the best we might do is to seek to be sincere in our efforts at change, remembering that as we make our vows in Baptism we say the words, “I will with God’s help”. And, I have to tell you, when I look at the list of behaviors that Paul lists for us to be free of, I am convinced once again, that I am unable do this work of living outside of God’s considerable support and love.

There is a sign on I-93, just outside of Concord that always has a riddle on it – the question on one side as you travel North and the answer as you come back South. This month the question is “What is strong as rock, but can be shattered with a single word?” Do you know the answer? It is LOVE.

When we look at the list of those behaviors listed in Ephesians, and admit we have personal acquaintance with most, if not all of them, I am struck by just how effective our words can serve as instruments for building up and for tearing down relationship. There is a Sufi saying: *“Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates. At the first gate, ask yourself, ‘is it true?’ At the second gate, ask, ‘Is it necessary?’ And at the third ask, ‘Is it kind?’*

Paul instructs us, *“Put away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.* *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths.”* Paul actually surprises us by recognizing that anger has its place. So, this is not to say that we should not be angry when we see injustice. And, Paul also says anger has its limits. It’s not easy to speak the truth sometimes, especially when the truth makes us angry. And, while we might say what’s *really on our minds* when we are angry, that doesn’t mean we are speaking the truth. The danger comes when we become our anger. Then it can eat at us from within. It can become the kind of anger that let’s us think we can sit in the judgment seat. It can become the kind of anger that refuses to see the humanity in the other.

Eugene Peterson in his The Message translation of the Bible interprets Ephesians’ this way:

*Say only what helps*

*Each word is a gift*

*Watch the way you talk*

*Let nothing foul or dirty*

*Come from your mouth*

As wise friend of mine says, *“Say what you mean, mean what you say, don’t say it mean.”*

Another interpretation suggests we throw away foul talk like we would discard rotten fish or sour milk. Now that is a very strong illustration of foul tasting words!!!

When anger is the basis for our truth-telling, division is hard to avoid. When love becomes the framework for our words, healing becomes more possible. Speaking the truth in love is the way, but it is not easy. It takes intention, self-awareness, practice and prayer and consultation with God as we grow into kind communicators of truth. It is truly a spiritual discipline. Going back to the entrance of the gates –as we walk through we ask - *Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?*

As we seek to become imitators of God we must trust in what God is doing behind that WORK IN PROGRESS barrier. A friend of mine recently remarked that as we practice the work of right living and strip off our character defects, we should require others around us to wear personal protective equipment – hard hats and safety goggles – to guard against falling debris and crumbling facades.

Our ultimate call is into forgiveness; to *live in love, as Christ loves us*. When we live in love, we emulate the character of God. When we live in love, we truly become imitators of the Creator. I offer you this poem from farmer, writer and poet Wendell Berry,

*“I know I have life only insofar as I have love.*

*I have no love except it come from Thee.*

*Help me please to carry this candle against the wind.”*

My friends, let us live a life of love. Amen