Our Gospel lesson is one of four weeks of readings from John 6, where Jesus is talking for 4 weeks about how he is the bread of life. Wonderful statements, but I preached on John 6 pretty thoroughly in 2012. So this year we're focusing on our Epistle readings each week from Ephesians. This is the 5th of 7 weeks of readings from the Letter to the Ephesians.

And today, in our reading from Ephesians 4 and 5, the overarching focus is on growing up, on growing into spiritual maturity. And I'm actually going to go through this lesson backwards.

To me, the key statement in this reading comes at the end, the first 2 verses of ch5:
"Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love (or walk in love), as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."[1]

Be imitators of God, as God's children. And live in love, walk in love in the same way that Christ loved us.

Paul is saying we need to grow up. And as we grow we need to emulate our heavenly Father, and we need to emulate Jesus Christ.

What does that look like? We hear it at the end of ch4:

Paul says, "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."[2]

Put away the negative emotions: bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, malice.

Instead, live in a different way:
Be kind, tenderhearted, and forgive one another, just as you have been forgiven.

That's the way to imitate God.

Now, when we look at imitating God, we often set God up as the standard and then compare how we act.

But one writer sets it up the other way. His basic premise is, what would it be like to follow a God who acts harshly? What would it be like to follow a God who acted like we often do?

He writes:
"Kindness is one of the purest forms of the imitation of God. How would it be if God were the kind of god who was always making snide or bitter remarks at us? What would worship and prayer be if we thought God has been talking about us behind our backs, putting us

[1] Eph 5:1-2
[2] Eph 4:31-32

down to others? How would we feel if we thought we couldn't trust God to tell us the truth, if he was always losing his temper with us?"[3]

And then he concludes:
"Well, how do people feel about us if that's what we're like? Wouldn't it be better in every way to be like God."[4]

That's what Paul is telling us.

Be imitators of God, as God's children.
Live in love in the same way that Christ loved us.
Put away the negative emotions: bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, malice.
Be kind, tenderhearted, and forgive one another, just as you have been forgiven.

Of course, we Christians sometimes fall short of this calling.

I've used this story before, but it bears repeating. I heard it from a pastor in the suburban Chicago area. One Sunday after church, he and his family went out to eat.

At the restaurant, a few tables away, a waitress accidentally dropped a salad into the lap of one of the customers, getting salad dressing all over the man's suit. She was very apologetic. But the guy was livid. He screamed at her about how stupid she was, how incompetent she was. And did she know how much his suit cost? Probably worth more than she made in a month. Red faced, hurling insults, really letting have it.

And the pastor said he realized: "This guy is in a suit on a Sunday afternoon. Who in this community wears a suit to lunch on Sunday? Probably someone who's just come from church." Youch.

That day that particular Christian flunked the test on imitating God, being kind and forgiving.

Now, none of us is perfect. We all can do dumb things. But we are called to try to live in a different way.

And that's what Paul is talking about towards the beginning of our reading.

"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up... so that your words may give grace to those who hear."[5]

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[3] Tom Wright, *Paul For Everyone: The Prison Letters*, p. 54
[4] ibid.
[5] Eph 4:26-27, 29

I love the complexity of this.
Be angry, but do not sin.
Don't let the Evil One use your words as a wedge.
Try to build others up.
Let the words that come out of your mouth be a gift of grace to your hearers.

Paul is not telling us to squelch our emotions. Anger is a natural human response to certain situations.

But if we're going to be grown ups, if we're going to grow up to be like our heavenly Father, like our Lord Jesus Christ, then we have to learn to limit our anger.

You're angry. Great. But don't keep banging on your high chair--don't keep throwing a temper tantrum like some toddler. Be angry. But get past it. Don't let the sun go down on your anger. That's an important part of Spiritual maturity.

As the old saying goes, you can't stop a bird from landing on your head. But you can stop the bird from building a nest on your head.

Be angry, but don't let the sun go down on your anger.

Like a child growing up to be like their parent, be imitators of God.

In other words, part of spiritual growth is not getting rid of emotions. Paul is not saying we need to become some sort of impassive zombies. We don't have to bury our emotions like some coldly logical Mr. Spock type character.

But we do need to learn to exercise some control of our emotions. That's a hugely important part of growing up to imitate God.

There's a remarkable movie that came out this summer about growing up and maturing emotionally. It is the Disney/Pixar animated film, *Inside Out*. I think it's a great film with many important things to say about our emotions. In fact, one of these days you'll hear me preaching about another aspect of the film, about it's relationship between joy and sadness.

But though I certainly think it's a great film, *Inside Out* does have one huge flaw.

It shows human beings as being completely driven by our emotions. In the master control center of the brain the movie has 5 emotions competing for control: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust. It's a great premise, at times humorous, at others poignant.

But the flaw is this.

In *Inside Out,* there is nothing to override the emotions except the emotions themselves. There is no sense of intelligence or sense of human will being there to ride herd on the emotions. There is no ego or superego.

As has been said, emotions are great servants but lousy masters. If we are completely driven and controlled by our emotions without anything else to harness or control them, then we'll often end up behaving selfishly and childishly.

As has also been said, emotions are an important part of the train for human beings and they can carry enormous freight for us, but the emotions make a lousy locomotive and can get us in trouble if we don't keep them in check.

The biblical image is to compare the emotions to a horse, which in a pre-industrial world was one of the most powerful tools or weapons that could be used. But the horse had to be controlled by bit and bridle in order to be useful.[6]

This to me, is the lack of anything overriding the emotions is the great flaw of *Inside Out.* The is one humorous scene however, when the other emotions do make use of Anger. Whenever Anger is angry, he literally gets fired up, flames shoot out of the top of his head. There is one point in *Inside Out* where the other emotions get Anger stirred up so that he's on fire, and then they use him like a blow torch, a cutting torch to remove an obstacle.

Be angry Paul says. That's going to happen. But make sure that emotion as well as your other emotions are under control.

Put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, malice.

Be kind, tenderhearted, and forgive one another, just as you have been forgiven.

That's the way to imitate God.

We live in a hyper-polarized age. The temptation is to subdivide ourselves into small, like-minded groups, and oppose anyone who differs in opinion from us.

That's why we have such a treasure in the Episcopal Church. Yes, we have our flaws. But we are a big-tent church that allows people of many different opinions on a wide variety of issues to proclaim together that Jesus is Lord, and to come to his table together to be fed by him.

And that has been in our DNA from the very beginning. We were born in a fiery time when the stakes were high. And the fire and the stake were often literal. Burning or beheading those who disagreed with you was an all too common occurrence.

And it was in the midst of such polarization that our tradition said, "No." We don't have to agree on everything. We only have to agree on the essentials. We must provide a place, a safe space where people of differing opinions can gather together to worship the living God, and to proclaim Christ's saving death and resurrection through the sacrament of Holy Communion. Together.

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[6] See James 3:1-5, or Psalm 32:8-9

It's no accident that our primary resource is called *The Book of Common Prayer*. We pray together, we worship together, in common. That's in our DNA from the very beginning. That's our continuing calling today.

We can tear down each other in fiery anger. Or we can heed the words of our Patron Saint.

Paul tells us, "Put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, malice... Be kind, tenderhearted, and forgive one another, just as you have been forgiven."

In our Baptismal service, I make the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the newly baptized and remind them that they are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.

Paul today says, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal."[7]

The invisible cross on our foreheads, the invisible seal says that we are officially certified to be God's children, and that we are trying to grow up to be more and more like our heavenly Father.

Are we going to let our emotions control us?

Or are we going to be imitators of God?

[7] Eph 4:30