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 Grace Episcopal Church
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The Bishop might be surprised to see an Emerson passage in the bulletin, and without his permission. (My excuse is he's on sabbatical.) Ralph Waldo Emerson might be surprised to find his words in a Episcopal church bulletin, also without his permission.

Emerson was a Transcendentalist. Transcendentalism was a philosophy centered in New England; the philosophy is comprised of belief in a divine force in the universe and in nature, but Transcendentalists did not subscribe to religion and dogma and liturgy.

You might remember from Joseph's forum on Thoreau that Emerson was Thoreau's mentor. Today's reading chosen by Lou's family is from Emerson's "Spiritual Laws."

It begins, "A little consideration of what takes place around us every day would show us, that a higher law than that of our will regulates events; that our own painful labors are unnecessary, and fruitless; that only in our easy, simple, spontaneous action, are we strong, and by contenting ourselves with obedience, we become divine."

By contenting ourselves with obedience, we become divine. The potential to become divine may sound unorthodox to our ears, but it is an ancient Christian concept. Early Church Father Athanasius posited that the imitation of Jesus offered us the opportunity to become divine—not to become God, but to become *like* God.

In his treatise *On the Incarnation* Athanasius writes regarding the Incarnation of Christ, "The word of God himself, He indeed assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the mind of the unseen Father" (ed. a religious of C.S.M.V., *On the Incarnation*, 93).

To paraphrase, God became like us so that we might become more like God. There is no misunderstanding regarding the virtuous life if God the creator lived among us practicing virtue. The idea that we might become divine is called Divinization or Theosis.

Again, we don't become God but we become godlike. I've mentioned I grew up with horses. Periodically the farrier showed up with his portable forge to shoe the horses. So that a horseshoe could be shaped to fit a horse's hoof, he'd place the horseshoe in the forge, where it became as glowing red and molten as the flames. The iron did not become flame, but came to resemble flame.

So it is when we conform our lives to Christ, in worship, prayer, and the aligning of our will with God's. We become so immersed in the divine fire we take on its characteristics.

In the 15th century, Thomas á Kempis wrote the Christian classic, *The Imitation of Christ*. Echoing Emerson's belief in a stream of power and wisdom animating the world, sixteenth century Anglican theological Richard Hooker believed that human reason allows us to navigate the moral life within the natural world.

The spiritual practice of uniting our life to Jesus is called the "Anglican Virtue Ethic". Writing in 2012, Dr. Timothy Sedgwick tells us the Anglican virtue ethic "is an exemplary ethic in which Christ reveals the shape or form of what it is to be human. . . Christ is the archetype, the exemplar, the model of what it is to be human" ("The Anglican Exemplary Tradition," *Anglican Theological Review*; Spring 2012; 94:2, 208).

Ours is a tradition of thought, of God becoming human thereby sanctifying our natural reason and enabling us to apply reason to morality. Our virtue ethic does not isolate us in pious thoughts and emotional comfort, but leads us to reflect on issues of morality and justice in the world. We must just idealize the love of Christ but we must love as he did. We must not only pray for justice and value justice but must act justly and seek justice in the world. The Episcopal Church is often accused of being political, but our reason requires us to examine the morality around us. We have been commenting on politics since King Henry VIII.

Several scriptures mention Christ as our exemplar:

Paul wrote in Ephesians, *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”* (Eph 5:2)

And in 1 Corinthians, *“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”* (1 Cor 11:1)

And in 1 John we read, *“whoever says, ‘I abide in him,’ ought to walk in the same way as he walked.”*

Emerson recognized Jesus as a great prophet, but his imitation differed from the Christian concept. Emerson found Jesus worthy of imitation not merely because Jesus was the son of God. Rather, he wrote, “Jesus is exemplary, not for being the inimitable Son of God, but for perceiving the divine Spirit incarnate in all human beings. He is unique for being the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of man.” (In Emily Dumler-Winckler, *The Virtue of Emerson’s Imitation of Christ: From William Ellery Channing to John Brown*, 521).

Jesus recognized the divine in each human soul. Can we do that, appreciate the worth of each person who crosses our path? This idea of the imitation of Christ goes beyond a self-conscious calculation of our virtuousness.

Jesus healed an untouchable hemorrhaging woman and engaged with and saw the wholeness of the woman at the well. Jesus dined with the marginalized and despised. Jesus, with his dying breath, loved a convicted criminal hanging next to him, and set before him, in his dying despair, the promise of paradise. And Jesus promised to be with him there.

Who among us is capable of going to death row and seeing the divine within the convicted?

God in God's infinite, generative, life-giving love continuously calls us to love more, more recklessly and less selectively, so that we might be refined in the fire of Love.

God calls us to see the holy in one another, even in the disagreeable, in the unkind, and in the arrogant. This is what it is to imitate Christ.

Are you willing to get so close to God in prayer and study, to imitate Jesus so closely in your actions, to unite your will with God's will that to act justly, love mercy and walk so humbly with God, that you glow like iron in the fire?

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