

In art class one day some children were working with plasticine, a clay-like substance that can be used over and over because it does not harden. A little girl had made a very nice model of a creature with wings. She held it up and said to everyone, "Look at the angel." There were exclamations of delight from the class and teacher. Then the girl quickly molded the angel back into a ball and asked everyone, "Now what is this?" Someone said, "It looks like a ball to me." "No," she said, "It's a hiding angel."

That's the message of our lesson from the first letter of John today. The letter is a loving and anxious sermon to several churches, probably showing writer John's concern as he saw that the second and third generation Christians were losing some of their enthusiasm and confidence. They had begun to doubt that they could be Christian disciples in the midst of the secular world so powerful and threatening around them.

"Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he (that is, Christ) appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3)

Dr. Bill Bouknight offered the following story: *Dr. Bob Stamps is a seminary professor who happens to be bald. One night he and his wife went out for dinner. They left their two small children with a babysitter. The babysitter got interested in a TV program and didn't supervise the children very well. When the parents returned, they found that their little son, Peter Andrew, had found his father's electric shaver and had shaved a big strip right down the middle of his head. Dr. Stamps said, "Peter Andrew, I have told you not to play with my shaver. Now you are going to receive a spanking you will remember." Peter Andrew said, "Wait until you see my sister!" They ran into their four-year-old daughter's room and there she was with all her hair shaved off. Now Bob was really furious. Just as he raised his hand to begin the spanking, Peter Andrew looked at him with tears in his eyes and said, "Dad, we were just trying to look like you." There was no spanking that night. Instead, they both got a good talking to and a hug.*

How do we, as Christians, try to look like Jesus? Putting nail holes in our hands or feet, or even wearing necklaces with crosses around our necks does not make us look like our Lord. If you think about the people you have known who have communicated to you God's love for you, you probably remember their eyes and the understanding that was in them as they looked at you; or perhaps their arms as they helped you up in some way; or maybe their hands as they gave you food or help or encouragement in some way. Each of us has something to do in life, I believe, that God whispers to us in our hearts, that causes us to share love with others and to end up looking like Jesus for someone else. But too often we cannot see this.

An illustration: Two caterpillars were crawling across the grass when they saw a butterfly flutter above them. One nudged the other and said, "You couldn't get me up in one of those things for a million dollars!" Those little caterpillars could not see what they would become. How like these caterpillars are we. We become so familiar with what is, the limitations and liabilities of our lives, that we fail to see what God can make of us -- new life from old.

To live a Christian life is to try to be like Christ, to follow in his footsteps. Martin Luther was fond of saying that we are to be "little Christs" to our neighbors. So what did Jesus do? One word that comes to mind is *forgiveness*. Jesus taught the prayer, "And forgive us..., as we have forgiven others...." When Peter asked him how many times a person should forgive, "As many as seven times?" Jesus responded with an exaggerated sense of unlimited forgiveness, "Seventy times seven." He lived out that same forgiveness in his life, asking God to forgive those who put him on the cross even as he hung there... "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

It is all too easy to hold grudges and be bitter toward others because of something done in the past. It is powerfully new and refreshing for the relationship when a person is able to forgive. Forgiveness is letting go of our claim to get even and letting God rebuild the relationship that was lost.

To look like Jesus means to be willing to forgive.

Pastor Mark Mollidrem told about a widow who visited the cemetery every week. Tears were shed and bitter words expressed, as she reminded her deceased husband how he had been so careless with his diet and eaten himself into an early grave. One day the woman's pastor happened to walk by as she was standing by the headstone. He approached just in time to hear her describe the kind of meals she had tried to fix for him, which he refused to eat, preferring to snack on high fat, high salt foods instead. The pastor stopped.

"Sounds like you are still mad at George," the pastor said quietly.

"I am!" the woman responded. "Why does he keep doing this to me? I can still see him late at night slouched on the sofa, eating a greasy sandwich and munching on potato chips."

"I don't see where he is doing anything to you any more, Mary," the pastor observed. "*You* are the one who won't change the channel in your mind."

"How can I? I just keep remembering what he did."

"Yes, but you could forgive him for the decisions he made and then get on with your life. Right now, your anger is burying you right here with him."

Those words startled Mary into seeing how she was holding on to her anger at her husband, not forgiving him. "Am I still nagging my husband?" she thought to herself. She realized that she had been experiencing a certain smugness in his inability to answer her now.

"O, God in heaven," she sighed, "how could I be so mean?"

The pastor did not see Mary in the cemetery much any more. The next time he did see her was at the community meal site for senior citizens, cooking over a hot stove, providing nutritious dinners for those who are on meager incomes or do not eat well alone. Mary found that forgiveness and service worked together to help her find new life.

THE VICTORY OF FAITH, Mark J. Mollidrem (adapted by FTE)

To look like Jesus also means to be in service to others. The scriptures show us that Jesus took

ordinary people and helped them find new life. He took an intolerant Jew named Saul (later Paul) and made him the ambassador of a universal gospel (see Galatians 3:28). He took a wishy-washy fisherman named Simon Peter and made him the founder of his church. He took a despised tax collector named Matthew and made him the writer of the First Gospel. He fed and healed and lifted those who could not make it alone. He changed lives and gave people power to make a difference for others.

Preacher Bill Bouknight tells of two women from South Carolina who became extraordinary as God worked in and through their lives.

The first, Mary McLeod Bethune, was born in the tiny town of Mayesville in 1875, the youngest of seventeen children born to freed slaves. At the age of nine she could neither read nor write. But when she was eleven she was blessed to attend a Christian school. Afterward, she attended the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Upon graduation, she went to Daytona Beach, Florida. Her total wealth was \$1.50, but she was determined to start a school for black girls. Mary Bethune raised money by selling pies to tourists. The school she founded became Bethune-Cookman College. She served as its first president. Later she helped President Franklin D. Roosevelt start the National Youth Administration, which provided employment for youth. Nobody could have predicted that that young illiterate black girl could have such a life and make so much difference for others!

The second woman, Agatha Burgess, of Buffalo, South Carolina, was at least 80 years old when her story was told in 2003. Charles Kuralt interviewed her in his "On the Road" series a few years before that. Agatha Burgess would get up every morning at 5:00 AM to cook. She prepared food each day for Meals on Wheels volunteers to take to home-bound persons. In addition, she would feed anyone who came to her door. She charged \$3 per meal if the person could afford it, which almost allowed her to break even, but if the person could not afford, it, she fed the person for free. Many people asked Agatha why, at her age, she didn't just sit down and rest. She would reply, "I want to be a person who lives by the side of the road and is a friend to man. I am able to serve my Lord by helping other people. I'm going to rest when I get to heaven." I could not find out whether Agatha Burgess is still alive and serving today or whether she has finally found rest, but I do believe that she looked a lot like Jesus to those who were fed by her work.

No matter how dry or unsure or too old or young we may feel, there is some sort of an angel within each of us that yearns to burst forth. If we stay close to Jesus Christ, new life and spirit will begin to show through us. We will begin to resemble our Lord and will become part of some work of God – providing love or forgiveness or hope or food - that right now we cannot even imagine.

Jesuit writer Anthony De Mello told that one day a writer traveled to an isolated monastery to interview a holy man who was reputed to be a genius. The writer asked him, "What is it about a person that qualifies him to be called a genius?" The holy man answered, "The ability to recognize." "The ability to recognize what?" asked the writer. "The ability to recognize the butterfly in a caterpillar; the eagle in an egg; and the saint in a selfish human being." (Told by

Anthony De Mello, SJ)

None of us has any idea what the coming months or years or even today will bring, in terms of challenges, hardships, or opportunities. Whatever comes, we are challenged and invited to remember who we are, to Whom we belong, and who we are asked to imitate. When we claim Jesus Christ by faith, we become God's adopted sons and daughters. With Christ living within us, we are designed to share his love with others, and sometimes to do extraordinary things. God has unique and meaningful work for us to do, way over and above our desires for success or wealth or acclaim or fame. So my prayer for us all: May today and all the time ahead be for each of us an unforgettable journey - an adventure! - with the living Christ. God has work and a plan for each of us, until when it's time, we will find rest in heaven. Thanks be to God!

(Some of this inspired by Bill Bouknight, *Collected Sermons*, Christian Globe.)

At the end of today's service we will sing a hymn related to this sermon, "Hymn of Promise," which expresses our faith that God can see what and when we cannot.

But for now, we'll sing "I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me," # 2153 in Black book. May this hymn be our prayer and our commitment. AMEN.