



“Perfect in the Eyes of God”

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***Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
February 20, 2011
Matt. 5:38–48 (NRSV)***

Matthew’s gospel is the compilation of stories about the life and teaching of Jesus in which the author strove to relate those stories to the Books of Moses and the Jewish faith from which his audience had come. Today’s gospel lesson is one in a long series of lessons that explores the relationship between Torah and Gospel.

Notice, for example, how the author alternates between the Law and the Gospel, in today’s pericope which begins as follows:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, “Do not resist one who is evil...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...”

A few verses later, Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

As if the challenge presented by the Christian life didn’t seem daunting enough, Matthew puts an exclamation point on that thought with these words from Jesus, “You therefore must be perfect, as God, your heavenly Parent, is perfect.

II

It is passages like these—passages like today’s gospel—that have led so many decent people to question whether they were fit to be called Christians. Many times I’ve heard people say to me, “I don’t make a very good Christian, because I know that you’re supposed to love your enemies, and I’m having a hard time doing that.” Or, similarly, “I know we’re supposed to be perfect, and I’m far from it.”

Every time I hear comments like these I find that their origins can be traced back to this passage in Matthew 5:38–48.

So you may wonder why I would choose this text for today's sermon. "Why rub it in? Why make matters worse," you might ask.

My answer to those questions is that today's lectionary provides an opportunity to set the record straight, by correcting a common misunderstanding about the Christian life being equated with perfection. The gospel truth is that the Greek term in Matthew 5 that is most often translated as "perfect" has other richer meanings. It also means "be whole," "be complete," or "become mature."

My field education supervisor back when I was a seminarian, Steve Garvey, put it this way to me years ago. He said, "Arlene, to be perfect in the eyes of God is to become most fully who God intended you to become."

If Steve was right—and my biblical studies have led me to believe that he was—then being perfect isn't about mimicking the behavior of someone else. It isn't about hitting someone else's high-water mark. It's about understanding our particular calling in life, striving to fill it by using the God-given talents that we have received, and becoming more whole people.¹

When we understand Jesus' teaching about law and gospel in this light, it becomes possible for us to be more patient and gracious with ourselves, especially when we don't behave perfectly by biblical standards, or by the standards of someone else, or perhaps most especially when we don't behave perfectly by our own high standards.

III

I like what Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, authors of the book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, have to say about the whole topic of perfectionism. They debunk the notion that perfectionism is our ultimate goal of the spiritual life, and instead promote the goal of wholeness. In the first chapter of their book, the authors explain that the first step toward wholeness is acknowledging that "I am not perfect."²

Think about their assertion for a moment. If the goal of the Christian life—or of any spiritual path—is never to make mistakes, then we are morally and spiritually doomed. But if, by contrast, our purpose in life is to become whole or more fully who God has called us to be, then a new world of possibilities is opened up for us, and an entirely different spiritual dynamic is created. We are no longer mired in our mistakes, or doomed to self-reliance. We are, instead, set free to hone our God-given gifts, and become our best selves. We are able to bring our personal assets to the table and play our unique part in the global village.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, et al. *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year A*. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, Int'l., 1992, p. 121.

² Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1992), p. 1.

Kurtz and Ketcham's wisdom reflects a more accurate reading and interpretation of today's gospel reading than is usually understood in popular culture. They encourage us, as Jesus encouraged the disciples, to lead a life that leans toward wholeness rather than perfection.

Understood in this way, the Christian life then is not about being or becoming perfect as in, "I make no mistakes." But rather it is about searching for and finding wholeness. To be whole is different from checking off a list of accomplishments or acquiring a collection of achievement badges as though life were one big scouting adventure.

If the first step toward wholeness is acknowledging that "I am not perfect," then the second step might be realizing that you and I weren't born to be like anyone else. My parents weren't perfect, and they would be the first to tell you that. But one of the things that they got right early on was how to help my sister and I manage the comparisons that were done of us as twins.

Marlene and I were constantly compared as twins. Comparisons were made about our height, weight, grades, athletic abilities, musical talent, and more. Our parents thankfully never played into these comparisons, and when we showed signs of getting sucked into other people's comparisons of us, they pooh-poohed the significance of these evaluations, and tried to get us thinking about what we liked about ourselves as individuals, what we were uniquely good at, and what we thought we might like to be when we grew up.

Our parents' approach was very much like the way that Jesus tried to reorient his followers in Matthew. Many in the Matthean community were hung up on what we might call today "spiritual perfectionism." Jesus pointed to the futility of perfecting the Law, and instead described practices that would lead his followers to the healing of relationships among friends, family, and neighbors—and ultimately the world. Examples of practices that would lead to individual and communal wholeness include de-escalating violence, loving our neighbor, and addressing the root causes of poverty. Jesus presents them as aspirations for spiritual wholeness, not as benchmarks for judgment.

IV

I think that the challenge for Christians is how to hear today's gospel passage in a way that does not hook our penchant for perfectionism, and in a way that helps us avoid the lure of our own or others' false standards that are grounded in a sense of personal or communal shame or insecurity.

Kurtz and Ketcham argue that the first step toward wholeness—and I would add, the first step toward proper understanding of today's gospel—is to admit that we are not perfect. A next step, as my mentor Steve suggested years ago, is to affirm our own unique callings as Christians. A third step, in my view, is to find our own voices and speak prophetically out of our particular faith experience.

Many of you know, for example, that I hold an advanced degree in homiletics. Over the years I have taught preaching courses for lay leaders, and worked with numerous field education students who were preparing for ordained ministry.

Invariably, through those experiences, I have found that preaching students come to class with the image of an ideal preacher in their minds, and a feeling that they must become like that person in order to be a truly great preacher. For many students—even many students of Northern European descent—that ideal preacher for them is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In their minds, to be a good preacher—to be the ideal preacher—they must speak and sound like Dr. King.

My first objective as a teacher of preachers is to try and blow that idea out of the water for them. I attempt to do that by explaining that there was only one Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and that he has come and gone. I go on to explain that there is only one “them,” and that their job as a preacher is *not* to become like Dr. King, but rather to find their voice as a preacher, and to speak the particular truth that they are called to speak.

V

I realize that not many in the congregation today feel a call to stand in this pulpit and preach a sermon, and yet we all preach a sermon every day with the way that we live our lives. The challenge for us, no matter which side of the pulpit we stand on, is to let go of any obsession we may have with perfection, lean into the spiritual practices that lead to wholeness, and find our voices and use them for the glory of God. Amen.