

Sermon

7th Sunday after Epiphany

2-19-17

Have you ever tried to be perfect? Or thought someone else was perfect? Or, God forbid, *thought* you were perfect!? Perfection is a funny thing. Very few of us would come out and claim to be perfect or even admit we are trying to be perfect. Because, well, that would not be a perfect thing to do. It would be arrogant and foolish. Plus if we have lived at least to the downhill side of life, most of us have come to know that perfection—or at least our definition of it—is an illusion. Life tends to sift that idea out of us.

Yet our Lord stated in the conclusion of today's Gospel, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Whoa. Plus Jesus stated this after giving a daunting list of ways we are to be perfect—"Do not resist an evildoer... Give to everyone... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." We hear this, we read this, and we understand why the Church has come to call these verses, "counsels of perfection." These are things that very holy saints may be able to do, but not regular Christians like you and me.

Yet Jesus said it. Our choice is to ignore what he said or try to understand it more fully and then live into it by God's grace. Which would you like to do? Well, we have fifteen minutes or so, so let's try to understand what our Lord meant; and more importantly, let us try to live differently, to live "consistent with the truth of the gospel" as Paul wrote in Galatians.

The first thing to do is to correct what we might imagine perfection to be. It is not having what we fantasize as a "perfect" life; that is, the perfect job, the perfect spouse, perfect children, perfect political leaders, perfect investments leading to being perfectly rich, a perfect reputation, perfect looks, perfect fashion sense, perfect health and fitness, perfect dance moves, perfect pitch, perfectly able to dunk a basketball and hit a hole in one, and on and on.

In other words, whatever our culture and family and personal beliefs have told us perfection is. Excelling at any one of those things can be good and life giving, but they have nothing to do with what perfection is. We could check off everything on that list and more and still feel empty inside and be bored with our lives and be searching for something more. And that something more is the perfection that Jesus is speaking about in the Gospel.

So what is the perfection that Jesus speaks of? It must be attainable in some sense or his commandment is really more of a taunt. Here are some ways to think about perfection in the Jesus way of looking at the world.

First let's do a little Bible study. In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says something similar about God and about us, but with one word being different. Instead of "Be perfect," the Luke version of this Jesus saying is, "Be merciful" (Luke 6:36). That helps

some. There is something in the very heart of God that exists in our hearts, too. It is something that we can access and practice and get better at over the course of our lives—it is to be merciful as our Father in heaven is merciful. What do you think?

The upside down thing is that merciful perfection is the opposite of what many of us think of as perfection, at least in ourselves. We do not want to make mistakes. We do not want to say or do the wrong thing. Like lose our temper. Or hold a grudge. Or need help from others. Or not have enough money to pay our bills. Or be petty. Or whatever character or other personal flaws we see in ourselves that we do not like.

And not only that, our struggle with perfection does not only mean being hard on ourselves—it can involve judging others who do not have those qualities that we think define perfection. You know those comments, some big, some small, some not said, only thought. Like: Can you believe she wore that? He has really let himself go. That is too bad about their family. He has such a bad attitude. You get the point.

We are not perfect creatures. If you are like me, I usually have a list of things every day that I can confess and ask forgiveness for from God and from those close to me. That is who I am—and that flawed person is not alone. I bet many of you can relate. And that is why we need to expand our understanding of what perfection is.

In addition to Luke's alternative word, "Be merciful," we can go back to the original language and learn that the word we translate as "perfect" in Matthew has other meanings. They include: "mature," "whole," and "complete." Here is how Eugene Peterson's Bible paraphrase translation, *The Message*, states this same verse:

"In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

That message lets us know that Jesus is demanding something different from us. We are not to be masters of our checklists of perfection. In fact, giving up our checklists is an important part of what Jesus is calling us to do. We are called to understand more fully and live into the new identity we have received through our baptism and faith in Christ. And what we receive from God through Christ is a new heart with the capacity for mercy, compassion, generosity, and graciousness. That is the perfection that God asks from us. And we can do it—because I have seen it done in people I love and respect.

One of my best examples is Lynn's mom, Shirley. She and I hit it off from the beginning. Obviously I fell in love with Lynn first and love and respect her whole family; but there was something special between Shirley and me. One thing I knew, clearly, is that Shirley loved me. And she loved those in her circle—John, Lynn and her sisters, other sons-in-law, grandkids (especially grandkids!); and also those people beyond her circle.

Like when Shirley and John worked in various ministries over many years to “draw her circle wider.” One was called Sharing and Caring. It was a ministry to help people who were having a hard time in life. Shirley treated the people she met there with grace. She was kind. She would not judge them.

Beyond her family and ministries, Shirley was simply a kind person. She was perfect. She still serves as one of my primary examples in life. When I get a bit too full of myself (it happens), a wise counselor gave me the advice to ask, “What would Shirley do?” If I take a moment and do that, and pray for grace, it helps me to grow up.

You probably have a Shirley in your life. Perhaps you are that Shirley for others. Now I realize I probably have Shirley up on a pedestal. I know she had difficult days and tough moments. But the point is the direction of her life. She was perfect in growing in grace. There were a few things she did that I think are helpful for us to follow so that we can grow up and become more and more merciful, too.

First, Shirley did not take her faith for granted. She did the little things that help us to grow as disciples of Jesus. She would set aside time to pray every day. She would read her Bible regularly. She attended church not only to serve but to receive the grace she needed to be perfect in mercy. Shirley was a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Second, she lived her life fully. She did things that brought joy to her—she was an outstanding framer of original art and she created art herself. She sang in the choir. She played with her grandkids and taught them crafts and just hung out with them. John and Shirley traveled for fun and to learn as well as for mission trips. She made time for what mattered in life. And as she approached the end of her life, Shirley would say to us, “It has been a good life.”

So as we leave church today, let us take that challenge with us—“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” But let us remember what that perfection means—to forgive and seek forgiveness; to be kind, even to people that are hard to love; and to offer grace and gratitude as our primary response to the gift of life that God has given to us. Amen.