

“Be Perfect”

The Reverend Allison Caudill  
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For a few years now, I’ve been identifying myself as a recovering perfectionist. Ever since I was small, I needed the LEGO tower to be the best LEGO tower there could possibly be. When my mom would put pigtails in my hair, I needed my part to be a perfectly straight line. When I was learning how to read, I refused to read aloud in class because I was afraid of making a mistake, I was afraid of being imperfect. As I grew older my perfectionism bled into every aspect of my life. I would fall to pieces over a stray note in my piano lessons, I would beat myself up when I kicked a soccer ball and it didn’t land exactly where I wanted it to. In school I would turn papers in late or not at all because I just couldn’t get the argument to come out right, couldn’t find an ending that perfectly echoed the opening line. In math class, I felt the flaming wash of shame when I couldn’t make my solutions match the teacher’s. I was being consumed, swallowed up, by my need to be perfect.

From time to time I still feel this pull, this temptation to be the perfect person, the perfect student and daughter and sister and preacher and singer and pastor. Maybe you have experienced this too. I believe from time to time we all

feel the pressure, the urgency of what we believe to be perfection. We are sold perfection on TV and movie screens, on the covers of magazines and in ads for gym memberships, weight loss products, political candidates, college admissions. We curate our family photos, our club memberships and social media profiles, all to present to our neighbors the mirror of perfection. It's exhausting, it's overwhelming, it's expensive. It's paralyzing. It is not perfection. It's a prison.

Today Jesus tells us, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." I gotta tell y'all, there have been plenty of times that I've left church with these words ringing in my ears. "Be perfect." Well, Jesus, that might be easy for you, but I'm a different story. I've been trying to be perfect for 25 years, Jesus, and it just doesn't seem to work. For someone trapped in the prison of perfection, the end of this passage shouts so loudly that all that came before it gets drowned out in the fear of imperfection and failure. We know we aren't perfect. Why is Jesus asking so much of us?

But the perfection we are trained to strive for by our world of social and economic success is not the perfection Jesus is talking about. He tells us, right from the beginning of today's Gospel passage, that our idea of justice and perfection is not God's idea. "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, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

That's a pretty tall order, at first glance. It is hard enough to love our own families sometimes, let alone the people who have hurt us or are out to get us. If feeling warm and loving toward every person who has ever done me wrong is Jesus' definition of perfect, well I guess I can finally give up on that pursuit.

But that's the tricky part, the bit that gets quoted a lot but often misunderstood. When Jesus talks about loving our enemy, he doesn't mean love them with warm hugs and unflinching positivity. He assumes we know how to love those who love us, how to greet with kindness those who are like us. Jesus is talking about the kind of love that has nothing to do with our feelings. Jesus is talking about the kind of love that calls two people who fundamentally disagree to kneel at the same altar rail. Jesus is talking about the kind of love that moves us to pray for both the victims and the perpetrators of violence. Jesus is talking about the kind of love that leads someone to lay down his life for his friends. Jesus is talking about perfect love.

The kind of perfection that Jesus is calling us to is something he KNOWS we cannot do on our own. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. Be perfect. As your heavenly Father is perfect. Our heavenly Father IS perfect. Jesus, the Son of God, is perfect. God's definition of perfection is loving your enemies. God's definition of perfection is praying for those who persecute you. God's definition of perfection

is maintaining sunshine and life-giving rain in a world full of sinful and imperfect people. In the honesty of our hearts, we know that we cannot do these things ourselves. But God works miracles with human hands. God shows up in our hands outstretched to receive his body and blood in the Eucharist. Our voices lifted heavenward in praise bring a glimpse of the heavenly chorus to this often dark and lonely world. When we embrace God's angry, scared, broken, lost, hungry, suffering ones, our hearts break open with God's own love for all creation. Perfect, unassuming, unconditional Love. The kind of love we can't earn or deserve. The kind of miracle that lets us be imperfect and still calls us by name, beloved. Beloved of God, that is what it means to be free.

If we try to be perfect like our worldly idols seem perfect, we will always fail. If we live in a constant state of competition, comparison, accumulation- we will always fall short. If we continue to build up the walls of our perfectionist prisons with accolades and appearances, we will never be satisfied. God knows, we will keep trying. But we are children of our Father in heaven, who is perfect Love. Perfect Love became human, Perfection was born and lived and died. Perfection is risen. Jesus calls us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us because he knows that we can. Jesus commands us to be perfect, not because he believes that we are perfect sinless people, but because we belong to a God who makes all things new. The Son of God is not a perfectionist. Jesus isn't asking us to

try to be God. Jesus is inviting us to be the vessels through which God's perfect love continues to permeate the world God has made. God knows, we will miss the mark. But to know and to serve God is perfect freedom, even freedom from the prison of our imperfections. Be perfect, therefore, as our heavenly Father is perfect. We can, with God's help.

