



February 16, 2020

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Matthew 5: 38-48

Higher Ground

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Perfect?? “Be *perfect*, therefore”?? – as if perfection somehow follows naturally from all these teachings that raise the bar so dramatically - as naturally as the words “happily ever after” follow from the valiant chivalry of fairy tale heroes??

Before those final words raise your anxiety-level or your blood pressure to unhealthy levels, I think a perfectionism intervention is probably in order.

What is “perfect”?

We say sometimes that it’s the enemy of the good – meaning that, if we allow ourselves to be dissatisfied with valiant efforts because they don’t achieve flawless results, we risk undervaluing or even undermining the good that those efforts do produce.

We say sometimes that practice makes perfect – and though it’s true that diligence in preparation is often rewarded, it’s also possible to be so driven in pursuit of a goal that you lose track of the joy that’s built into the process of getting there.

We say sometimes that something is perfect as a way of inoculating it against the possibility of criticism – for example, to describe a phone call as “perfect” (as a synonym for “unimpeachable”) – or as a way of pre-empting criticism, maybe as an antidote to self-defeating self-judgment. Some years ago, in the church I served in Boston, we invited a remarkable artist named Michael Dowling to spend the season of Lent with us, guiding us in creating a communal piece of sculpture week by week to help us express our longing for God. Of course, art triggers achievement anxiety for many of us; but Michael was ready for that. You’d bring to him the piece you’d been working on, and bring along a big dollop of that insufficiency anxiety too, ready to save him the trouble of criticizing what you’d made by doing it yourself – but Michael would take it in his ingenious hands, and look at it, and he’d say, “Perfect.” I came to think that maybe the real spiritual treasure of that Lent was, not so much the

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piece we built together, but the experience of learning that it was possible to catch some fleeting glimpse of perfection in whatever your hands had made if your heart was in it.

“Perfect” is a word that triggers our anxieties about achievement – and these verses from the Sermon on the Mount do seem to have that effect. After the comforting words of the Beatitudes, which we listened to together two weeks ago, and the inspiring words about being the salt of the earth and the light of the world which Rev. McGowan pondered last Sunday, suddenly we’ve turned a corner into a sequence of teachings in which Jesus seems to set about raising the bar of expectations where some of life’s most vexing challenges are concerned. Precept by precept, he moves us to higher ground: not just that you shall not kill, but that you shall not be angry; not just that you shall not commit adultery, but that you shall not lust; not just that you shall not retaliate, but that you shall not resist. To top the raised-bar of all those expectations with an exhortation to “be perfect” seems to endanger the whole sequence of teachings: I was with you, Jesus, when you said that the poor in spirit are blessed – in fact I even thought there might be some hope for me; I’ll do what I can to season this broth of life with whatever salt I can offer, and let this little light of mine shine, let it shine. But what hope is there for me if *perfection* is the standard to which this impoverished spirit of mine is going to be held?

“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.” This is, of course, the place where Jesus moves to what was, for him, the highest ground of all, which is that we must take the love of God that we hold in our whole heart and soul and mind and strength, and love our neighbor with that love – whoever our neighbor happens to be. He didn’t make that commandment up; it comes from the book of Leviticus (of all places), a passage that was surely engraved upon his heart (19:18). And in that same place in Leviticus there are words that are surely echoing here: “You shall be holy,” says Leviticus; be holy, “for I the Lord your God am holy” (19:2). Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. . .

True, “holy” and “perfect” are not quite the same thing. But let’s think about that. Holiness is what makes the sacred different from the profane. As we try to bring holiness into our priorities and our relationships and our institutions, those aspects of our life come slowly to resemble more closely the way it is with God – “on earth as it is in heaven,” as the saying goes. If the invitation to us is to be holy, as God is holy, then we might slowly start to love the world the way God loves the world. And if there are those outside, looking in, who wonder about this religion of ours, who wonder what this God of ours is like – well, if we start living on the higher ground to which we are being invited, then we might be able to say more and more, *see, this is what God is like*. This is how God holds those whom the world so often drops; this is how God heals that which life so easily breaks; this is how God relates to those whom others are so ready to ignore. What it means to be less than perfect is to wield God’s love only partially in this world – because partial love, selective love, partisan love, is so far from the character of God’s love: it only embraces those who embrace us back, and thinks nothing of rejecting those who reject us. God doesn’t love that way. Be like God, then, Jesus says: be holy – be perfect, not in the sense of flawless, but in the sense of whole and wholehearted, complete and mature and fully realized.

We should look again at these dangerous-sounding words about not resisting an evildoer, turning the other cheek, not retaliating in kind. What’s perfect or holy– what’s whole or mature or fully-realized – about that?



Anyone who knows the experience of abuse knows how offensive it is to suggest that compliance or acquiescence is required for the sake of peace. There is no peace when compliance with evil leaves evil's tyrannical power undiminished; there is no justice when acquiescing to coercion siphons away agency or compromises integrity.

But we can be sure that that's not what Jesus was asking of us. Commentator Matthew Boulton says it so beautifully: "Do not fight fire with fire, Jesus says; rather, fight fire with water, and thereby refuse to take part in the incendiary, all-too-familiar work of injury and domination."¹ The disciple of Jesus is not told to be passive or non-responsive or acquiescent; the disciple is told to return positive acts of good. There are, to be sure, forces in the world that would victimize; but we are not to think and act like victims, any more than Jesus did. We are to imitate God, who sends rain upon the just and the unjust, and stands ready to love both the saint and the sinner. If you love only those who love you, what difference does that make? Here on earth, there's no enacting holiness other than by living in transformed relationship with your neighbors. The higher ground is to seek to love in a way that modeled on what we get from God, not what we get from those who wish us ill. The choice between life and death, blessing and curse, is ever before us – and the higher ground is to stand firm in the choice of life, to hold fast to the conviction of blessing.

To be honest, I've struggled this week with how to say something about the ways in which the sharp edge of this teaching cuts to the bone of events that are swirling around us now. But I came to feel that it was actually the very word "perfect" that was insisting that that connection be made – because "perfect" is a word that's embedded in our history and our self-understanding as a nation. So, I'll take one more deep breath and tell the truth as I see it – knowing that you may have a different take on this truth, which I welcome hearing if you care to share it.

We are, of course, as a people and as a culture in this very moment in our history, still in unrequited pursuit of a *more perfect union*. Our founders recognized the work-in-progress nature of the civic wholeness and maturity they were trying, with their experimental Constitution, to build. It's hard not to ache, now, at the thought of how they might view the failures of their best-laid plans that we are watching, or how they might hear the discord, disparagement, dysfunction that those failures have set off as public integrity seems to be collapsing all around us. It's not the first time, of course, that we've failed each other in the ongoing effort to perfect our union. I'm

¹ Boulton's "Homiletical Perspective" essay on the gospel text for Epiphany 7 appears in David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., Feasting on the Word (Year A, vol. 1), Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012, pp. 381-82.

sure it's not the first time that many have considered simply giving up, disengaging, despairing of any possibility of maturity or wholeness or completion of this great, unfinished, unperfected project of democracy.

But perhaps there is both solace and sober instruction still waiting for us in these ancient words of scripture. The verb in verse 48 is actually in the future tense in the Greek: "you *will be* perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." Just like the even more ancient verse in Leviticus: you *shall be* holy – if you love with the love God teaches you. Now I'm enough of a Calvinist not to imagine that perfection is within my own sinful reach. But I'm trying to be enough of a Christian to imagine that Jesus means it when he blesses even the poverty of my spirit, and bids me to follow him into a future of transformed relationships – which is what democracy is.

This church has already stepped up to that higher ground at least once, in a primordial way when it was barely a decade old, in 1836, a moment of national moral catastrophe, when it refused the invitation to collude in the violence that was slavery, and turned its other cheek to those who said that abolitionism had no place in the Presbyterian Church. Our predecessors stood their ground on their conviction that Jesus was calling them to a more perfect union.

And now, across all these years, and in the midst of another moment of national moral catastrophe – what is our responsibility? I think we can hear Jesus still calling us to higher ground from these verses: Do not strike back; stand firm. Do not let the bitterness of others embitter your own generosity. Do not be a victim of oppression; don't let it rob you of your voice. Do not let the collapse of others' integrity all around you lower the bar on your own. Do not let the struggle isolate you, or divide you from those who will hold this vision and share this work with you.

And above all, do not fail to believe that the power of God's love and justice are sufficient to perfect even you. Blessed are you, poor in spirit. You are salt. You are light. Therefore, choose life: bring what courage you have, and integrity, and hope, and conviction – bring them to become part of what God is building. Bring them – and don't be surprised when God takes what you bring, and holds it in those ineffable, ingenious divine hands, and says, "Perfect."

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