

Perfect

Martha C Langford

Third Presbyterian Church, Rochester

19 February 2017

Lev19:1-2, 9-18; 1 Cor 3:10-11, 16-23; Matt 5:38-48

All week, the phrase “perfect is the enemy of good” has echoed in my mind. This seventeenth century Italian proverb warns us not to let impossible standards keep us from completing the work before us.

Like Murphy’s law, it has a few corollaries. The army version was “good enough for Government work” —a kind of blessing said over a project or plan that might have flaws but was still workable.

This would include the two-tone paint job on the line shack, when we discovered that tan comes in more than one color. Good enough for government work.

So, I’ve done a balancing act between two phrases—perfect is the enemy of good and the voice of Jesus. “Be perfect.”

The command to perfection becomes a sticking point for many. Theologian William Loder observes the ways this verse—this single command—makes the Sermon on the Mount seem “impractical” or “utopian” or the province of holy orders filled with monks and nuns rather than instruction for the breadth of Jesus’ followers.¹

And then there are those communities for whom the command to “be perfect” creates a relentless search for “purity” found in the exclusion of any who don’t measure up.

Perfect!

I noticed that these extremes don’t seem to line up with the balance of Matthew’s gospel, so I wondered how we might hear Jesus differently this morning. This led me on a Word Girl journey (thank you Becky)—and has me asking you to give the “geek” and the Greek a chance to explain.

Matthew’s Greek is relatively simple—nothing like Paul’s rhetorical style. Most English translations of verse 48 fall into one of two camps: the first translates Jesus’ words as an imperative command “Be perfect” and the second translates the words as a future condition in which the listeners will participate—“you shall be perfect...” The first is in our Bible translation; yet the second translation matches a literal translation of the text.

Not only that, but the simple translation “perfect”—with all its modern baggage—does not capture the sense of the Greek in which Jesus followers are becoming *teleioi* like God is *teleios*.

Now for the **really nerdy** part: When the Hebrew Bible was rendered into Greek, *teleios* was the word used to translate the Hebrew concept of *tamim*—being wholehearted, complete, sound, whole, unimpaired, having integrity. And it turns out that *teleios* really does encompass those qualities of being whole, mature, complete, and, yes, perfect.

So, today's scripture is not talking about flawless perfection like we find in a diamond, or some distant paragon of virtue, but about a deepening wholeness and completion and maturity that grows even as we navigate the messy middle of our day to day lives.

William Loder notes that Matthew uses "perfect" again verse 19:21 as he tells the rich young man that the path to eternal life demands he sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. Then, Jesus says, you will be "perfect," complete, mature, and whole. In Matthew's gospel that *is* eternal living.

This is Matthew's word to us. We—as followers of Jesus Christ—are participants in being and becoming ever more wholehearted, mature, complete, sound, unimpaired, and filled with integrity... and that faith is demonstrated in deep commitment to the poor, the least, the last, the lost, and the lonely.

This is the growing faith that takes our Junior High youth to Heifer this week.

And that takes me to Leviticus. Yes, Leviticus!

In our morning worship services, we include two of the four scripture passages assigned to the day. The New Testament dominated my early planning back in those salad days (three weeks ago) when newsletter articles and bulletin information were sent for publication. I'll confess this is partially because Leviticus does not make our Presbyterian "hit parade" – in fact this is the only reading Leviticus found in the entire three-year cycle of scripture readings.

Yet, the words of Leviticus 19 have been a compelling conversation partner this week. So here's quick recap:

In the wilderness, the Israelites have set up the tent of meeting and in it God spends time with Moses giving the commandments that will shape the people and help them live out the 10 commandments given on Sinai.

On this day, like so many other days, God calls Moses and begins: "tell the people..." Then we hear something that is sort of familiar, 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.'

And Israel wasn't left to wonder what "holy" looked like. In vignettes—punctuated by the words "I am the Lord"—God gives them both a ritual and moral framework for "holy" living.

In a farming culture, God tells them to leave parts of each field and vineyard unharvested and to leave fallen grain and grapes ungathered. This is to ensure that the landless—the poor and the alien—would have access to essential elements of life, to bread and to wine.

It seems that to "be holy" meant a sacred way of living: without deceit or false dealing or lies sworn in God's name. Without fraud or theft, or the withholding of wages. Without cruelty to those with disabilities. Without unjust judgements or favoritism for poor or rich. Without slander or profit through violence or hatred for kinfolk. Without vengeance or grudgefests.

The instructions conclude with these familiar words, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

To be set apart as God's people is to live with justice and with love in ways that are very concrete. Later, Moses will tell the people that following God's commandments—following God's way—is what *makes them holy*.

You shall be holy. You shall be whole.

Following God's way transforms us into a reflection of God's sacredness and into a reflection of God's wholeness. Following God's way by following Jesus is central to the story of who we are and who we are becoming.

This week, I took part in a webinar on creating change. It's something that associate pastors do. The speaker noted that knowing ourselves is instrumental in the process of transformation. She asked us, "What is the story you tell yourself that helps you know who you are?"

I thought about the stories that we share at Third Church that tell us who we are.

In Johnston Hall, there is a picture of Lillian Alexander. An ordained elder of this church, she became a champion for women's ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. In 1954, she led the Third Church session to overture our denomination to clear the way. She encouraged our leaders and members to support this vision, and she raised her voice in support as the overture made its way through a prolonged approval process. Lillian rejoiced when vision became reality 2-1/2 years later as the Rev Margaret Towner became the first woman ordained as a Presbyterian pastor.

Lillian Alexander and Third Church were the catalyst that paved the road to my own ordination to pastoral ministry. You all are part of why I am standing here this morning.

The history of this church is filled with moments when together, we have been a catalyst for the transformation of the church and the transformation of the world. It bears witness to our faith.

Just yesterday at a planning retreat, the Spiritual Formation Committee considered the ways that faith is formed here at Third Church. We've come to know that we are formed by the practices of faith—by the ways that we follow God.

- We are formed in worship—as we express our love for God in prayer and singing, in contemplation of scripture and sharing the sacraments.
- We are formed by study and encounter with scripture, by sharing the ways that God's word intersects with our lives.
- We are formed by outpourings of compassion and hospitality for each other and for those who come as strangers and leave as guests.
- We are formed in ministry by feeding those who hunger, housing those without homes, encouraging school children in their studies in all those places where we rebuild the fabric of life with others.
- We are formed in advocacy as we promote the common good of people in this city and this state and this world.
- We are formed in families and we are formed in friendships that transcend our differences and strengthen our foundations.

We are grounded by these practices—they are part of the sacred ground on which we stand, ancient yet reimagined from age to age. As we live and share, shape and renew them, we become conservationists of the way of God. Yet Jesus is calling us to be and to become—more.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls uses this phrase six times: you have heard it said.... But I, I say to you.... With each phrase, he destroys the wisdom of the age.

Among his ethical assertions, Jesus tells us that malice is murder in one's mind; leering is adultery in one's heart; swearing on God's name robs speech of integrity. Jesus teaches that reciprocity is not justice; that love of God and neighbor also means love of our enemies and lifting fervent prayer on behalf of those who persecute us—and not those sneaky and snarky prayers that ask God to give them what they have coming.

This is the way we become God's children, Jesus says.

William Willimon explains "this is the way that God is, and therefore this is the way we ought to be. God's love is extravagant, risky, an offense to common sense; and God's children love like that." ²

It is who we are. It is how we become wholehearted, complete, sound, whole, unimpaired, and learn to live with integrity and authenticity. This is our challenge, to follow Jesus on God's way and let it stretch us and grow us. Jesus calls us out from those places where we are grounded and comfortable and hands us shovels expecting us to break new ground.

From the practices and the places that we have been conserving, we are called to be catalysts and activists stretching into less comfortable and certain surroundings—places where Jesus is laying new foundations of love in the world.

Jesus calls us from comfort into the broken places, and calls us to compassion and companionship with those we find there. Jesus calls us:

- To open our pantries and kitchens, AND our hearts to those who hunger.
- To open our sacred spaces to those who need refuge.
- To go beyond politeness and risk opening our very selves to those who are the lonely or lost, the least or the last.
- To tamp down the protests that deny our complicity in the oppression of others and work toward mutual freedom.
- To put aside conventional wisdom for the lessons of love.

Jesus calls us to stretch ourselves beyond the conservation of the way that we know and onto the sacred ground of transformation where we become catalysts for change in ourselves and in our world.

Lillian Alexander is our witness—we have done this before—it is part of who we are. Imagine how that witness might grow, in whose voice it might speak. Imagine what might be transformed today. Know that as we follow Jesus Christ, opportunities will come. Imagine it.

Today, we have opportunity to advocate for young men and women in New York State who are in being held in adult prisons before they are adults. These teens are 36 times more likely to attempt suicide and 50% more likely to be attached with a weapon. The prison environment cultivates them in criminal behavior. Raise the Age—seeks to change this practice and with it change the lives of teens in our criminal justice system transforming the path of reciprocal justice into the path of redemption and rehabilitation.

You may sign a card of petition for our legislature after this service.

We can do this because we are God's people: who worship a God of extravagant and unfettered love; who hear the word and let it take hold of us, who break out the shovels and build on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

We can do this because we seek to follow God's way. And that is just perfect.

¹ Loder, William. "Epiphany 7." Murdoch.edu.au. 23 February 2014. Web.

² Willimon William H. *Matthew 5:43-48*. Interpretation, January 2003. 62. Print.