

“Perfection”

A Sermon Preached at Emory Presbyterian Church (Atlanta, Georgia)

February 19th, 2016

Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

Our second scripture reading this morning is the beating heart of the Sermon on the Mount, a passage that is so familiar, so well known, yet also so difficult to hear. It is a challenging passage, just as the Old Testament reading we heard a moment ago is a challenge to do things a certain, to make sacrifices, and, in many ways, to go against the cultural grain. But this is a timely—even providential—passage, as well—a trying word, for trying times. So let us prepare ourselves to hear this word by joining in a moment of prayer. Let us pray:

O God, give us the listening ear. We seek this day to have ears that will not shrink from the word that corrects and admonishes—the word that challenges us to deeper consecration and higher resolve—the word that lays bare needs that make our days uneasy, that seizes upon everything good and decent in our nature, channeling it into paths of healing in the lives of others. Give us the listening ear, O God. We seek the disciplined mind, the disciplined heart, the disciplined life that makes our ears the focal point, through which we may become mindful of expressions of life—expressions of *your life*—that are foreign to our own. Give us, O Lord, the listening ear. Amen.¹

“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 return violence with violence. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you for your coat, give your cloak as well; and if you are forced to go one mile, go a second mile as well. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

“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; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Be holy, for I am holy. Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Be all you can be...no, be *more* than you can be. Our scripture lessons this morning contain a prophetic call to not simply settle for the status quo, but rather to aim higher and deeper even than the principles of justice and fairness that we like to think govern human society. It is not enough to love those who are in a position to love you back. It is not enough to treat people equally, when social structures and systems of power have rendered them

¹ Adapted from Howard Thurman, “The Listening Ear,” in *Meditations of the Heart*.

unequal. Justice cannot be reductively understood as returning violence with more violence, however righteous that violence may seem. The living Word of God calls us this morning to be *more* than the good that we know, *more* than the just that our laws dictate. It calls us—Jesus call us—to be different—to stand apart—to be *holy* and *perfect*, just as our Heavenly Parent is holy and perfect.

It's a lot to ask. But Jesus isn't asking: he's *commanding*. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Give to all who ask. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.

Add to that the commandments of Leviticus: leave the gleanings at the edge of the field, and the grapes that fall off the vineyard vines. Provide for the widow and orphan, the refugee and the immigrant. Deal fairly with your employees, even when it cuts into your profits. Respect your neighbor's property, even if he is the kind of guy who runs a leaf blower at 7 am on a Saturday. Be good to your family, even that sister-in-law you don't really like, or the uncle who always shows up late and drinks too much. Keep your heart open and unbegrudging.

It's a long list, my friends. And they aren't suggestions: they are commandments. They are the things that Christians get called out on all the time, with folks saying things like, "I thought you were supposed to turn the other cheek..." or "What happened to loving your enemies?" or "that's a mighty big house you got there, pastor...I'm curious: how much of the tithes given for the widows and orphans went into building that?" Those who are less concerned with spiritual matters tend to like that aspect of this passage, because it affords the opportunity to point out all the ways those who claim to be holier-than-thou are really less-than.

But, then again, sometimes Christians need to be called out. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center just this past fall, 68% of white evangelical Christians supported reducing or even eliminating immigration from Muslim-majority countries. And lest we Presbyterians think we're so much more loving, 59% of white mainline protestants also supported those policies. Perhaps those numbers are part of what emboldened the administration to impose its travel ban on refugees and immigrants in the first place.

At the same time, just two days ago the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s highest ecclesial officer, Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson Jr., signed on to an amicus brief publicly opposing the President's travel ban order. As part of an interfaith coalition, Nelson stated that opposing this ban reflected "the Presbyterian church (U.S.A.)'s historic commitment to welcoming refugees and demanding an immigration system free from discrimination." He went on to conclude that "We continue to stand with the widow, orphan, and foreigner."² And I say, well done, Stated Clerk. Consider that one commandment kept. We can check that box.

We have seen Jesus's instructions play a role in other social struggles as well. The most obvious example is of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's invocation of Jesus's commandment to love one's enemies to support his nonviolent approach to the civil rights movement. In his book, *Stride Toward*

² Toya Richards, Director of Communications and Assistant Stated Clerk, PCUSA Office of the General Assembly, "Stated Clerk signs amicus brief opposing President Trump's travel ban," (February 16, 2017), <<http://www.pcusa.org/news/2017/2/16/stated-clerk-signs-amicus-brief-opposing-president/>>.

Freedom, Dr. King wrote “From the beginning a basic philosophy guided the movement. This guiding principle has since been referred to variously as nonviolent resistance, noncooperation, and passive resistance. But in the first days of the protest none of these expressions was mentioned: the phrase most often heard was ‘Christian love.’ It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protests with the creative weapon of love.” Dr. King recognized the method to the seeming madness of Jesus’s command to turn the other cheek: he wrote, “if I respond to hate with a reciprocal hate, I do nothing but intensify the cleavage in broken community. I can only close the gap in broken community by meeting hate with love.”³ The “creative *weapon* of love,” he called it. Would that all the world could be so armed! It reminds me of that mural by the street artist Banksy that depicts a protester with a bandana over his face preparing to hurl a colorful bouquet flowers like a grenade.

Perfection, in the sense that Jesus uses it, is not a matter of completing a set of tasks or checking boxes on a list of commandments. It is something altogether different from what we have come to think of as perfectionism in our society. To be perfect as *God* is perfect means reaching beyond achievement to something unfathomable: the incomprehensible, perfect love of God. That’s where we are in the scripture, after all. Jesus begins by saying, “You have heard it said, love your neighbor.” You have heard it said: *love*. Love is the beginning, middle, and end of human perfection. As the familiar verses in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians remind us, even if a person has everything—*everything*—that marks them for greatness—wisdom, generosity, faith to move mountains—even then, if they have not love, they are nothing. For Love is what bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.⁴

What does it mean to be perfect, as Our Father is perfect, but to love another, as God has loved us?⁵ What does it mean to be perfect, as our Holy Parent is perfect, but to recognize that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us?⁶ What does it mean to be perfect, but to pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven,” and to pray it not just with our mouths, but with our feet, and our hands, and our hearts?

This is what makes perfection *holy*. The Hebrew adjective *qadosh*, “holy,” indicates something set apart and consecrated to God. Though much of the book of Leviticus is concerned with how to keep religious artifacts or clothing or human bodies holy— that is, pure, set apart, and consecrated—the passage we heard this morning says “*you* shall be holy.” That’s not quite right: actually, it says, “*y’all* shall be holy.” God calls Israel as a *people*—a congregation—rather than merely as individual *persons*, into holiness. And this isn’t just a description of something God will do (“y’all shall be holy”), but, just as Jesus exhorted those who had followed him up on the mountain, the Lord *commands* Israel: “Be holy, y’all! For I am holy.” Be holy, y’all, for I am with you, and *you* are with *me*.

³ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “An Experiment in Love,” in *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 16, 20.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:1-2,7-8.

⁵ John 13:34

⁶ Romans 5:8

Be holy, y'all. Be perfect, y'all. Maybe it's because I'm a carpetbagger from Oregon, but I think there is something about that particular formulation of God's commandment for us that makes perfection seem just a bit more down to earth—like something that you might find written on a chalkboard, or a post-it on the refrigerator door. It is still a challenging word, but it's beginning to feel like a word that we are not unfamiliar with.

Because ultimately the kind of perfection Jesus is teaching about—this perfect love—is what we were made for. The great American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote,

The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end....[T]he inert effort of...thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance...solidif[ies] and hem[s] in the life. But if the soul is quick and strong, it bursts over that boundary on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep...the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions....[In these expansions,] there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable. That is, every man believes that he has a greater possibility...[and] Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides...For ever it labors to create a life and thought as large and excellent as itself.⁷

I was reminded of these words of Emerson about what human striving looks like this week at a lecture by Dr. Eddie Glaude, a professor of religion and African American studies at Princeton. His lecture was about “black democratic perfectionism,” a concept he developed out of the thought of Emerson and the writer-activist James Baldwin to help make sense of the meaning of the Black Lives Matter movement for us today. Black democratic perfectionism, Dr. Glaude claimed, is the assertion not simply that the lives of black people have significance, but that the significance of those lives can be seen in the expanding circles of creative and relational power that ripple from out from a community that was once enslaved and still remains oppressed in many ways by the calcified structures of white supremacy in our society—that these lives call America back to the originary task of democracy: to live together, a plurality in community, a nation striving to live up to promise of “a more perfect union...” The Black Lives Matter movement, Dr. Glaude concluded in his lecture, is a political movement, yes: but it is also a movement of Emersonian self-realization, in which the heart that refuses to be imprisoned by the circles drawn around it by racism and fear bursts out into the possibility of a new society—a more racially just society; a less fearful and more loving society; perhaps even that great Beloved Community that Dr. King preached about. Insofar as Black Lives Matter is this kind of movement, it provides everyone in American the opportunity to love with that kind of perfect love that embraces but does not extinguish difference. It is an opportunity to be perfectly loving, just like our loving Creator.

There's an old adage: Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. It's a warning against *perfectionism*. But perfectionism indicates an obsession with finality, with production and conclusion and satisfaction. But the perfect love of God confounds completion. It “unsettles all things,” as Emerson says, with the unknown, unanalyzable residuum of difference that we call “holiness.” The residue of God

⁷ R.W. Emerson, “Circles,” <<http://www.emersoncentral.com/circles.htm>>.

in this world is that divine spark that each of us carries within—for y'all are holy, says the Lord, just as I am holy.

There is something holy in each of us...and that something holy in me is circling out towards the holy in you. The holy in here is circling out into the streets and the cars and the houses and the campus and the city and the nation and the world...That is the Holy Spirit of God moving in you, moving in this place, circling out from this place. It is the spirit of Love, the spirit of peace, the spirit of nonviolence. It is the spirit that leads us into unexpected ways of confronting the challenges of this life—of going deeper than goodness and justice to perfection. May you abide in that spirit, as it abides in you—and be perfect. Amen.