



The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

Matthew 5:38-48; Psalm 119:33-40

A week or two ago someone forwarded me a cartoon by e-mail. Two women in Biblical outfits are riding their donkeys into town. Each of the donkeys has a bumper sticker on its rump: one says “My kid is an honor student,” and the second says “My kid was the MVP at State.” Up ahead they see another donkey with a bumper sticker on its rump: “My kid is perfect.” “You know,” says one of the women to the other, “I get really sick of that Mary sometimes.”

That might be our reaction to hearing Jesus’ words from today’s gospel: “Be perfect.” Great, Jesus: easy for you to say, Mr. Sinless! This is the fourth Sunday in a row we’ve heard gospel passages from the Sermon on the Mount, the famous portion of Matthew’s gospel where Jesus outlines a way of living that goes far beyond even the strictest provisions of the Law. And so this week he tells us to be perfect: perfect in the same way that God in heaven is perfect. Has he forgotten who he’s talking to? It’s one thing when Jesus is talking about grace and mercy and forgiveness of sins. Those are the parts of the gospels we like to hear. But a challenging passage like this is hard to hear without becoming totally discouraged. And so instead we may try and explain it away. Maybe Jesus didn’t really mean perfect, like perfect perfect. Maybe he meant, pretty good. Maybe God grades on a curve. Because if Jesus expects us to be perfect, who among us has a chance?

Part of our problem might be the way we understand the idea of perfection. A little over five years ago I went through one of the strange rites of passage our society prescribes for men who are thinking about getting married: I got a crash course in diamonds. As you probably know, the most expensive diamonds are the ones with the fewest blemishes. There are diamonds with inclusions the naked eye can see. Then there are ones that can only be detected under magnification. And the rarest and most expensive diamonds get a clarity grade of F: Flawless. As it happens, if you go to Thesaurus.com and look up the word “perfect,” the exact same word shows up first: “flawless.” In our culture, we tend to think of

perfection as a state of being free of flaws. We end up defining perfection not in terms of what it is—but of what it isn't. The problem is, that's a definition that works well for diamonds, but not so well for human beings. It might lead us to think "avoiding sins" is what's most important in life: living carefully, always on the lookout for ways we might commit an infraction. It's a recipe for a kind of life that's pale and fearful: like a piano student who's so preoccupied with not playing a wrong note that she totally misses the emotional meaning of the music.

That's not the kind of perfection Jesus is calling us to.

In the scriptures, the idea of perfection tends to mean something much bigger and more interesting than just being free of blemishes. It's more to do with fullness, richness, lavishness: it's about what it is, not what it isn't. Sometimes the Greek word *teleios* is translated as "mature" or "complete," which might get a little closer to the right connotations. At any rate, the kind of perfection Jesus is calling us to live out is about a way of living where we're preoccupied, not with our own performance, but with the incredible generosity of God. That generosity is what we see reflected in Jesus' ethical instructions today: he invites us to practice an exuberance, even a recklessness in self-giving. Somebody takes your coat? Hand them the shirt off your back! Somebody presses you into service to carry their load for a mile? Go with them two!

There's an almost theatrical quality to what Jesus is talking about: going above and beyond the ordinary requirements as a kind of funky performance-art testament to God's love. It has a lot in common, in fact, with the tactics of nonviolent protesting: turning the other cheek, refusing to retaliate, loving the enemy until he changes his heart or at least is too ashamed to keep oppressing you. In the last couple weeks we've seen once again, in Tunisia and Egypt, just how surprisingly powerful this kind of nonviolent activism can be in the real world. But Jesus doesn't seem to be endorsing this way of life as a tactic, because it "works." Instead he's proclaiming that this is the way to live simply because it matches the personality of God, who sends the good sun and the good rain on the good and the evil alike. It starts to seem as if God's favorite way to be perfect is, quite simply, to give it all away.

We see that self-giving personality of God at work way back in our Old Testament reading from Leviticus. God commands the people to be "holy"—which sounds a lot like being "perfect"—and then spells out that being holy involves saving out some of your crops so the poor and the alien can have a meal. And we see that personality revealed even more fully in Jesus himself. He lives his life "without sin," to be sure. But for anyone who's ever heard even a couple of the stories of Jesus, his lack of infractions is hardly the interesting thing about him. What's interesting, what's compelling about Jesus isn't what he avoids doing, but what he does. He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners. He proclaims God's acceptance to the outsiders. He even goes to a shameful execution, becoming himself the ultimate outsider. As St. Paul would later put it, Jesus "became sin" on our behalf by accepting an unclean death on a cross of shame. Jesus is simply not interested in living a life apart, unstained by the unpleasantnesses of human existence. Remember the stories of Jesus' triumphant appearances to his disciples after being raised from the dead? He shows them the scars on his hands and feet. Jesus, at his most perfect, doesn't have his blemishes magically erased. For him they aren't badges of shame but trophies of glory.

We're going to have to face it: the kind of perfection God is all about is pretty different from the flawlessness we're so preoccupied with. And thank God for that. Because it means you and I might have a chance at God's kind of perfection after all.

It's not that we're sinless. You and I aren't Jesus. Each day, in so many ways, we continually fail to live out the kind of life Jesus calls us to. We are sinners, beyond a doubt.

But God is in the business of forgiving sinners. So just as Jesus' lack of sins is hardly the most interesting thing about him, our multitude of sins really aren't the most interesting thing about us in God's eyes. Our sins are something God can handle: as we sang a few moments ago in the Gloria, Jesus is the one who "takes away the sin of the world." What God is more interested in is growing us to the perfection we are called to: growing us to our completeness as human beings, bearing the image of God, and living exuberantly, each of us in a unique way, according to the self-giving pattern of Jesus; with even our forgiven sins and healed flaws eventually contributing to our beloved individuality as children of God.

Somewhere in California, on a windswept ridge in the White Mountains at more than 10,000 feet above sea level, stands a grove of ancient bristlecone pines. One of them, the Methuselah tree, is the oldest known single living organism on Earth. It has been alive since long before Jesus—since the ancient pyramids of Egypt were being built. Its gnarled, wizened branches bear nearly five thousand years' worth of scars: each one incorporated into its growth over the centuries, each one contributing to its utter uniqueness. It couldn't be much more different from a flawless diamond—the word flawless seems wildly inappropriate. But it is mature. It is complete. It is alive. It is, in fact, perfect.

May God bring each of us to the perfection of completeness, forgiving our sins, healing our flaws, and giving us the rich and abundant life of Jesus Christ our Savior.

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